

Великая Отечественная: Неизвестная война
Артем Иванович



УТЕРЯННЫЕ ПОБЕДЫ КРАСНОЙ АРМИИ



Война могла закончиться намного раньше...

Abstract

The war could have ended much earlier...

The Red Army could have stopped the Wehrmacht as early as the summer of 1941. If the Soviet military command had acted in accordance with the real situation, and not relied on the outdated dogma to beat the enemy "with little blood on enemy soil"! A radical turning point in the war could have come as early as 1942. If the available forces and means were used competently, and not in the way AM Vasilevsky wrote about it: "The hastily created strike groups consisted, as a rule, of rifle formations weakened in battles. The troops, sent by the Headquarters by rail, acted slowly and, without completing the concentration, immediately entered into battle ... "We could have entered Berlin in

1943, at the latest - in 1944. If instead of hundreds of thousands of soldiers' lives, in vain put in frontal attacks, the Red Army would have clearly worked out the interaction of military branches. So why did the battles of World War II develop in this way and not otherwise? How did it happen that potential victories turned into the hardest defeats? Who specifically made responsible decisions and how could events on the battlefields develop otherwise? Was another course of battle possible? respectively, their result? How did one event affect the course of the entire campaign?

The author gives non-standard answers to these and other questions, arguing with reason that the entire course of the Patriotic War is a history of lost victories and unused opportunities.

-
- [Artem Ivanovsky](#)
 - [Preface](#)
 - [Chapter 1](#)
 -
 - [Lost Opportunity Analysis Chapter](#)
 - [2](#)
 -

- [Lost Opportunities Chapter 3](#)
- -
- [Lost Opportunities Chapter 4](#)
- -
- [Chances of Winning](#) .
- [Chapter 5](#)
 -
- [A Serious Failure That Shouldn't Have Happened](#)
- [Chapter 6](#)
 -
- [Defensive or offensive? Chapter 7](#)
- -
- [Mistakes that could have been avoided Chapter 8](#)
- -
- ["Big Saturn" and "Little Saturn" Chapter 9](#) .
- -
- [A look without rose-colored glasses](#)
- [Chapter 10](#)
 -
- [UNJUSTIFIED RISK](#)
- [Chapter 11](#)
 -
- [Lost second Stalingrad Kamenetz-](#)
- [Podolsk cauldron Lost third](#)
- [Stalingrad Chapter 12](#)
- -
- [Backstab](#) .
- [Chapter 13](#)
 -
- [Strachwitz and Boer-Komarovsky](#)
- [Chapter 14](#)

- - [Great Victory in February 45th](#)
 - [Bibliography](#) ____
- [notes 1](#)
 - [1](#)
 - [2](#)
 - [3](#)
 - [4](#)
 - [5](#)
 - [6](#)
 - [7](#)
 - [8](#)
 - [9](#)
 - [10](#)
 - [11](#)
 - [12](#)
 - [13](#)
 - [14](#)
 - [15](#)
 - [16](#)
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 - [22](#)
 - [23](#)
 - [24](#)
 - [25](#)
 - [26](#)
 - [27](#)
 - [28](#)
 - [29](#)
 - [30](#) [31](#) [32](#) [33](#)

- [34](#)
- [35](#)
- [36](#)
- [37](#)
- [38](#)
- [39](#)
- [40](#)
- [41](#)
- [42](#)
- [43](#)
- [44](#)
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- [102](#)
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- [105](#)
- [106](#)
- [107](#)

- [108](#)
- [109](#)
- [110](#)
- [111](#)
- [112](#)
- [113](#)
- [114](#)
- [115](#)
- [116](#)
- [117](#)
- [118](#)
- [119](#)
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- [124](#)
- [125](#)
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- [129](#)
- [130](#)
- [131](#)
- [132](#)
- [133](#)
- [134](#)
- [135](#)
- [136](#)
- [137](#)
- [1 38](#)
- [139](#)
- [140](#)
- [141](#)
- [142](#)
- [143](#)
- [144](#)

- [145](#)
- [146](#)
- [147](#)
- [148](#)
- [149](#)
- [150](#)
- [151](#)
- [152](#)
- [153](#)
- [154](#)
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- [158](#)
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- [167](#)
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- [172](#)
- [173](#)
- [174](#)
- [1 75](#)
- [176](#)
- [177](#)
- [178](#)
- [179](#)
- [180](#)
- [181](#)

- [182](#)
- [183](#)
- [184](#)
- [185](#)
- [186](#)
- [187](#)
- [188](#)
- [189](#)
- [190](#)
- [191](#)
- [192](#)
- [193](#)
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- [207](#)
- [208](#)
- [209](#)
- [210](#)
- [211](#)
- [2 12](#)
- [213](#)
- [214](#)
- [215](#)
- [216](#)
- [217](#)
- [218](#)

- [219](#)
 - [220](#)
 - [221](#)
 - [222](#)
 - [223](#)
 - [224](#)
 - [225](#)
 - [226](#)
 - [227](#)
 - [228](#)
 - [229](#)
 - [230](#)
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Artem Ivanovsky
LOST VICTORIES RED
ARMY

Великая Отечественная: Неизвестная война

Foreword



Sixty years have passed since the last volleys of the Great Patriotic War thundered over our country. Unprecedented in terms of destructive power and the number of victims, this war left a long and painful memory behind it. But there is another reason: not so many documents, films, photographs, eyewitness accounts have been preserved about any of the wars of the past. Therefore, the ground for reflection on the most tragic page in Russian history is inexhaustible. It would seem that the more the years 1941 and 1945 move away from us

in time, the more clearly and distinctly we imagine the course of military events from the height of today. However, everything happens exactly the opposite. After several decades, the history of the Great Patriotic War not only retains many "blank spots", but also becomes more and more confusing and contradictory. Some new documents and facts are constantly being discovered, original versions appear that refute established opinions and assessments.

Today it is obvious that the official Soviet history, which we all learned at school, is very doubtful from the point of view of a real presentation of the events of the Great Patriotic War. First of all, this concerns her explanation of the catastrophe of the summer of 1941. The main reason was considered to be the sudden, treacherous attack of fascist Germany on the Soviet Union. In addition, the German army allegedly had an overwhelming superiority in manpower and equipment over the Red Army. Therefore, our troops had to retreat for so long and gather their forces to deliver a crushing blow to the enemy. Interestingly, the refutation of these axiomatic theses of Soviet history can be easily

found in the memoirs of our generals and marshals, that is, in completely official Soviet sources. For example,

Admiral of the Fleet of the Soviet Union N.G. Kuznetsov in his book "On the Eve" completely dismisses all talk of a sudden, treacherous attack. A prominent Soviet naval commander claims that by the time the war began, all the habits of the German command were well known to us, and the open concentration of German troops on our borders spoke for itself. Moreover, Admiral Kuznetsov directly says that military people have no right to be taken by surprise, since wars have not begun for a long time with a knightly warning "I'm coming at you." And he makes a shocking conclusion: there can be no question of the surprise attack of fascist Germany on the Soviet Union. But the book of N.G. Kuznetsova was published in Voenizdat, the official organ of the USSR Ministry of Defense. Memoirs of Marshal of the Soviet Union G.K.

Zhukov is considered to be canonical. All the top military leadership of modern Russia sees in them an example of a truthful presentation of the history of the Great Patriotic War. But in his "Memoirs and Reflections" Marshal Zhukov completely refutes the thesis of the military superiority of the Germans. It is enough to look at the colossal figures of arms production in the Soviet Union, which he cites in the chapter "On the Eve of the Great Patriotic War", which the Germans simply could not dream of. All their total tank production for the pre-war period did not even reach the level of 1936, achieved by the Soviet military-industrial complex. And these are again generally accepted figures from the official source of the Ministry of Defense. Throughout the fifteen years of modern Russian history, a crackling debate continued on the topic of

who was going to attack whom first - Hitler against Stalin or Stalin against Hitler. From a military point of view, this issue is of no significant importance. But what really matters is that in the fierce ideological battle between historians-propagandists and propagandists, historians completely lost sight of one really important military-historical issue.

A comparative analysis of the forces and means of the opposing sides as of June 22, 1941 suggests a very interesting idea. It can be formulated as a question: "Could the Red Army win in the border battles, transfer military operations to enemy territory and defeat him in the first year of the war?" Soviet history, generals and marshals in their memoirs give an unequivocal answer: "No." It is curious that historians of the so-called alternative school, Viktor Suvorov and others, share a similar opinion. But the comparative potential of the Red Army speaks of a reverse possibility. The author claims that the Wehrmacht could have been defeated as early as 1941. Our military leaders had the opportunity, even in an extremely unfavorable situation on June 22, to make such decisions, the implementation of which did not leave the Germans the slightest chance to reach Moscow, Leningrad and Kyiv.

After the war, the famous German commander Erich von Manstein wrote the book *Lost Victories*. It caused a wide resonance both in the West and in the Soviet Union. The author believes that the time has come to talk about our lost victories. And we had a lot of them during the war. Perhaps this is the most intriguing and least illuminated issue of our military history. It's strange that it hasn't even come up yet.

It should be emphasized that the leading Soviet military leaders in their memoirs sometimes tried to consider the problem of the lost victories of the Red Army. But for reasons of an ideological nature, they did this in rather cautious terms that did not go beyond the established general line. Nevertheless, what they said is enough to confidently state that the lost victories are not the fruit of the author's fiction. Therefore, in vain, some comrades will accuse the author of trying to cast a shadow on the history of the Great Patriotic War and our Armed Forces. This book is about facts that are confirmed by the most authoritative military leaders of the Soviet Union. You just need to carefully read their memoirs. The lost victories of the Red Army are not just hypothetical arguments about some possible events. For each

the lost victory had to be paid with thousands of soldiers' lives, streams of blood. It was because of the lost victories that our fathers and grandfathers came to Berlin in April 1945, but they could have come back in 1944.

Undoubtedly, all the belligerents of the Second World War made mistakes and miscalculations. Everyone had missed opportunities and opportunities. But the tragedy is that for us, Russians, the cost of lost victories has become the highest.

Chapter

1 Border Battles of the North-Western Front

On June 22, 1941, at 0:30, the General Staff of the Red Army sent the last peacetime directive to the troops of the western border districts.

“To the military councils of the LBO, PribOVO, ZAPOVO, KOVO, OdVO. Copy: People's Commissar of the Navy.

During June 22–23, 1941, a surprise attack by the Germans on the fronts of the LBO, PribOVO, ZAPOVO, KOVO, and OdVO is possible. The attack may start with provocative actions.

The task of our troops is not to succumb to any provocative actions that could cause major complications. At the same time, the troops of the Leningrad, Baltic, Western, Kyiv and Odessa military districts should be in full combat readiness to meet a possible surprise attack by the Germans or their allies.

I order: a)

During the night of June 22, 1941
points of fortified areas on the state border;

b) before dawn on June 22, 1941, disperse all aviation, including military aviation, over field airfields, carefully disguise it;

c) put all units on alert. Troops
keep dispersed and disguised;

d) put the air defense on full combat readiness without additional lifting of assigned personnel. Prepare all measures to darken cities and objects; e) no other activities without special

do not carry out orders.

Timoshenko. Zhukov"

Marshal G.K. Zhukov noted in his memoirs about this directive:
"Experiencing a feeling of some strange, complex split, S.K. and I returned. Timoshenko from I.V. Stalin.

On the one hand, it was as if everything in our power was being done to meet the impending military threat as prepared as possible: a number of major organizational measures of the mobilization-operational order were carried out; as far as possible, the western military districts were fortified, which in the first place will have to engage in battle with the enemy; finally, permission was received today to issue a directive on bringing the troops of the border military districts to combat readiness. But, on the other hand, the German troops may go on the offensive tomorrow morning,

while a number of important measures have not yet been completed in our country. And this can seriously complicate the fight against an experienced and strong enemy. The directive, which at that moment was transmitted by the General Staff to the districts, could be late .

—
The directive is indeed late. German troops began advancing to their original positions near the border as early as eight o'clock in the evening on June 21. Army Group North under the command of General Field Marshal Wilhelm von Leeb, which included the 16th and 18th armies and the 4th tank group, was concentrated in the zone of the Baltic Special Military District. In total, the troops of the northern German group consisted of 29 divisions, armed with 680 tanks, 850 combat aircraft, about 8.5 thousand guns

and mortars.

The PribOVO troops consisted of the 8th, 11th, 27th armies and the 5th airborne corps - a total of 25 divisions, 1500 tanks, 1814 combat aircraft, about 7.5 thousand guns and mortars.

Since the main forces of the district were moved to the border, the German command developed an optimal combat plan. In accordance with this plan, by means of deep, swift breakthroughs of mobile tank mechanized groups, it was envisaged to prevent the possibility of the withdrawal of the Russian border armies to lines suitable for organizing a strong, long-term defense. In pursuance of the

Field Marshal Leeb put forward the best parts of the breakthrough to the first echelon - the 41st and 56th motorized corps, commanded by Generals Reinhardt and Manstein. Both still young officers went through the school of Heinz Guderian, the largest specialist in maneuverable tank warfare, and were rightfully considered the best in organizing deep offensive operations. Their neighbor on the right was another pupil of the "tank Heinz" - the commander of the 3rd tank group, General Goth. Together with the 9th Army of the Center group, he was to drive a tank wedge into the junction of the Soviet North-Western and Western fronts in order to capture Vilnius on the second day of the offensive. As for the Soviet plans for the conduct of hostilities, Marshal AM Vasilevsky in his memoirs cited the following considerations: "The plan provided

that hostilities would begin with repelling the blows of the attacking enemy; that these blows would immediately be played out in the form of major air battles, with the enemy's attempts to render harmless our airfields, to weaken military, and especially tank, groupings, to undermine the rear military installations, to damage railway stations and major cities near the front. On our part, it was envisaged that the forces of all aviation would have to frustrate the enemy's attempts to gain air supremacy and, in turn, inflict decisive air strikes on him. At the same time, an attack on our borders by ground troops with large tank groups was expected, during which our rifle troops and fortified areas of the border military districts, together with the border troops, would be obliged to hold back the first onslaught, and the mechanized corps, based on anti-tank lines, with their counterattacks, together with the rifle troops they will have to liquidate the groupings that have penetrated our defenses and create favorable conditions for the transition of Soviet troops to a decisive offensive. By the beginning of the enemy offensive, it was planned to enter the territory of the border districts of troops supplied from the depths of the USSR. It was also assumed that our troops would enter the war in all cases fully prepared and

V as part of the groupings envisaged by the plan, that the mobilization and concentration of troops will be carried out

ahead of time"[2] . Nevertheless, the subsequent course of the fighting in the border zone showed that not a single commander of the front, army, or corps was ready to act in accordance with this carefully calibrated plan.

First of all, a few words about aviation. Airfields in the western districts, as is known, were built in the immediate vicinity of the border. This is 20, 30, and sometimes 10-15 kilometers. It is not entirely clear how, with such a deployment, the command expected to inflict decisive air strikes on the enemy "in turn". The strike of an air enemy in a similar situation was the first and last. And so it happened: most of the Soviet aviation at the border airfields was destroyed on the ground, not having time to take to the air.

Another major vulnerability in the plan outlined above was communications. It was envisaged that the enemy would undermine our rear military facilities and, above all, communication centers and means. G.K. Zhukov stated: "A little later, we became aware that before dawn on June 22, wire communications with the troops were disrupted in all the western border districts and the headquarters of the districts and armies were not able to quickly transmit their orders. Agents and sabotage groups thrown into our territory by the Germans destroyed wire communications and killed communications delegates. As I have already said, a significant part of the troops of the border districts was not provided with radio facilities"[3] . Why it was not provided, although the plan provided for all this, is very difficult to say. In addition, it was also envisaged that our troops would enter the war in all cases fully prepared, that their

mobilization and concentration would be carried out in advance. And yet, according to G.K. Zhukova: "The rifle units raised on combat alert, included in the first echelon of cover, entered the battle on the move, not having time to take up prepared positions" [4] . These are just some of the discrepancies between the planned and the actual, taken "offhand".

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Thus, on the morning of June 22, the troops of the Baltic District entered the war under obviously unfavorable conditions. In the very first hours, communication between the headquarters of all levels and military units was disrupted.

Accordingly, command and control of the troops was lost. At the border airfields, most of the available aircraft were destroyed or damaged. Therefore, throughout the first day of the war, German aircraft continuously walked over the heads of our ground troops, bombing and storming the positions they occupied. The

German strike forces went on the offensive in the Siauliai, Kaunas and Vilnius directions. The 41st and 56th motorized corps struck at the junction between the 125th and 90th Soviet rifle divisions in the Tauroge-Rai-Seiniai area. But, despite what G.K.

Zhukov, a clear delay in the directive on bringing the troops to combat readiness, the commander of the 125th Infantry Division, Major General P.P. Bogabrun managed to deploy his unit in accordance with the plan to cover the state border. His soldiers offered fierce resistance to the Germans. Reinhardt left the infantry to storm the Russian positions, bringing the tanks into the breach made at the junction. Manstein's tanks also successfully developed the breakthrough.

Only a few battalions of the 5th, 33rd and 188th rifle divisions of the 11th Army, Lieutenant General V.I., managed to deploy in the Vilnius direction. Morozov. Goth's tanks quickly crushed them, striving to capture the key point of Alytus, where strategic bridges across the Neman were located, by the end of the day.

In his memoirs, General Gott wrote that, on the whole, the enemy troops were taken by surprise: "Our breakthrough was successful due to the fact that the enemy's border positions were either defended very weakly or were not covered at all. Numerous field fortifications were insufficiently provided with garrisons or did not have them at all. Thus, by the end of the day on June 22, the situation was as follows: the 41st motorized corps, breaking the resistance of the 125th rifle division and defeating the 48th rifle division of Major General P.V. Bogdanov, crossed at the village of Aregala across the Dubyssa River, where he got a valuable trophy - two intact bridges. Even Reinhardt developed the attack on Siauliai. On the right, Manstein's corps was advancing just as quickly. Goth's tanks reached Alytus safely. Here they had to take on the oncoming battle with the Soviet 5th Panzer Division. In addition to the T-26 and BT-7, it included the latest T-34s, but their superiority was not fully achieved.

least use due to the lack of air support. German aviation had a decisive influence on the outcome of this battle. Leading a continuous pursuit of the retreating enemy, Goth's tanks immediately captured the bridges and crossed the Neman. Meanwhile, the

commander of the Northwestern Front, Colonel General F.I. Kuznetsov and the Military Council of the front were studying the situation. Since the most threatening situation was created in the Siauliai direction, where Reinhardt's corps broke through farthest of all other German units, the commander decided to "cut off" the enemy tank wedge with flank attacks of the 3rd and 12th mechanized corps. In addition, he gave the order to deploy the 9th mobile anti-tank artillery brigade of Colonel N.I. Polyansky. It consisted of 250 guns with a caliber of 76 and 85 millimeters. As a support, the brigade was given the 202nd mechanized division of Colonel V.K. Gorbachev. In other directions, it was supposed to contain the enemy by the forces of rifle units. Soviet mechanized corps were a formidable force. In total, as part of the 3rd mechanized corps, Major

General AB Kurkin and the 12th, commanded by Major General N.M. Shestopalov, there were more than 1400 tanks, including KB and T-34. Against 400 for Reinhardt. But their superiority could have an effect in the event of a well-prepared concentric strike. And that just didn't work out. First of all, General Kuznetsov did not have accurate information about the enemy and, in scheduling the offensive for the morning of June 23,

he deliberately neglected the organization of proper intelligence. From the commanders of all rifle divisions there were reports of attacks by a significant number of German tanks. Instead of actually checking them, the front commander ordered some of the tanks to be transferred to support the infantry units. In addition, the hasty mass advance of such a large number of mechanized troops to the starting areas led to a crush on the roads and a backlog of rears. Since the 12th mechanized corps was located 100 kilometers north of the 3rd, the advance itself and, naturally, the concentration of tank divisions could not be simultaneous. However, it is fair to say

that the commander was pushed in the back by Moscow directives, demanding to advance as soon as

possible. As a result, all the reasons mentioned above led to the fact that proper communication and interaction was not established between the advancing mechanized corps. The divisions entered the battle at random, without the support of each other. Moreover, while the 23rd Panzer Division of the 12th Mechanized Corps under the command of Colonel T.S. Orlenko fought, the 28th Panzer Division of the same corps was forced to stand still in anticipation of lagging tankers. A similar story happened in the 3rd mechanized corps. Therefore, they acted according to one similar scheme: the division was introduced into battle, had some initial success, then the Germans, maneuvering their modest forces and clearly interacting with aviation, smashed the mechanized corps divisions one by one, which fought in complete mutual separation. Their attacks did not at all prevent Manstein from taking Kaunas on June 24 and advancing 50 kilometers, reaching Ukmerge. On the same day, Hoth's tanks entered Vilnius.

Introduced into battle "on a first come first served basis", cut off from the rear and having no air cover, the tank divisions of the 3rd and 12th mechanized corps were completely defeated by the end of June 26th. At the same time, part of the mobile forces of Reinhardt furiously stormed the near approaches to Siauliai. But the artillerymen of Colonel Polyansky and Gorbachev's division, having taken up a tough defense, successfully held back their onslaught. The defeat of the mechanized corps allowed Reinhardt to release his main forces and carry out a detour. Therefore, the 202nd Mechanized Division and the 9th Art Brigade, being

under the threat of encirclement, left Siauliai. Only after losing almost all the tanks, General Kuznetsov gave the order to the troops to retreat behind the Dvina and there, behind a strong natural line, organize a strong defense. At the same time, the 27th Army of Major General N.E. was advanced from the depths. Berzarin. The decision was correct, but it turned out to be too late. The enemy was not going to give up the initiative. The Germans were the first to approach the Dvina: on June 26, the advanced units of Manstein broke into Daugavpils and again captured the precious bridges. As a result, the front was cut in two, the 27th Army was

Manstein had already seized bridgeheads on the eastern bank of the Dvina, aiming at Pskov and Leningrad.

G.K. Zhukov described this dramatic moment as follows: "On the North-Western Front, the situation began to deteriorate sharply. The 8th and 11th armies, which had escaped encirclement, due to the insufficient organization of the front command, retreated in divergent directions, suffering heavy losses. To cover the Pskov-Leningrad direction, the Headquarters of the High Command ordered the commander of the 21st mechanized corps, General D.D. Lelyushenko to advance from the Opochna-Idritsa region to the Daugavpils region and prevent the enemy from forcing the Western Dvina. However, this task was completely impossible, and on June 26 the enemy crossed the river with large forces and captured Daugavpils. On the same day, the

commander of the 4th Panzer Group, General Göpner, ordered Manstein to stop. The 56th motorized corps broke 130 kilometers ahead, leaving far behind the other troops of Army Group North. Therefore, the commander was afraid that the corps might fall into the "bag". Erich von Manstein wrote about this in his memoirs: "The goal - Leningrad - was moving away from us into the distant future, and my corps had to wait at Dvinsk" [6] .

The Russian command, as Manstein foresaw, hastened to take advantage of the resulting operational pause. The 5th Airborne Corps of Colonel I.S. was thrown into the German bridgeheads. Bezuglova and the 21st mechanized corps of Major General D.D. Lelyushenko. But, according to established practice, interaction, communications, command and control of troops were not properly organized. As a result of three days of fierce fighting, our troops suffered heavy losses, and the bridgeheads remained in the hands of Manstein.

Meanwhile, Reinhardt's corps crossed the Dvina, parts of the German 18th Army entered Riga. From June 29 to July 1, the German command again took an operational pause. But Manstein worried in vain. Instead of preparing for defense, General Kuznetsov, at the request of the Supreme Command Headquarters, was preparing for a new offensive against enemy

bridgeheads. Early in the morning of July 2, the 41st motorized corps delivered a powerful blow to the junction of the weakened 8th and 27th armies. The front was immediately broken. The Germans developed an offensive

army. Both Russian armies again retreated in divergent directions. The front headquarters was surrounded.

On July 4, the Headquarters of the High Command appointed Major General P.P. Sobennikov, who previously commanded the 8th Army. On this day, the 1st Panzer Division of the Germans broke into Ostrov. In the form of a trophy, she got whole and unharmed bridges across the Velikaya River. The 1st Mechanized, 22nd, and 41st Rifle Corps, moving forward from the Stavka reserve, were forced to engage in battle on the move and were therefore overturned by the enemy. Only on the right flank did Lelyushenko's 21st mechanized corps manage to gain a foothold in the Sebezh UR and repulse Manstein's attacks at the Sebezh-Opochka line. As noted in the memoirs of G.K. Zhukov: "Because of the delay in the exit of our reserves to the Velikaya River, the enemy captured the city of Pskov on the move. The 8th Army of the North-Western Front, having lost contact with other troops, retreated to the

north. On July 9, Reinhardt's corps began an offensive on Luga. Manstein, convinced of the strength of the Russian positions in front of him, turned to the north and brought the tanks into the previously punched gap in the Ostrov area. The 56th motorized corps bypassed the Sebezh UR, developing an offensive against Porkhov, Shimsk and Novgorod. Porkhov was taken the next day. In the Soltsy area, the 22nd Rifle Corps, formed mainly from Estonians, went over to the Germans.

The headquarters of the Supreme Command was well aware of the danger looming over Leningrad. The construction of the Luga line of defense proceeded at a rapid pace. In the shortest possible time, a fortified area was created, consisting of two strips with a length of about 175 kilometers and a depth of 12 km. On July 12, the 41st motorized corps started

fighting in the foreground with poorly organized UR. Faced with a defense in depth, the Germans immediately got bogged down in fierce positional battles. The commander of the fortified area, General P.M. Pyadyshev, leading a stubborn and active defense, finally stopped the enemy by the end of the third day of fighting.

Manstein found himself in an even more difficult position. As usual, he pulled far ahead and came under a flank attack from the 11th Army replenished with units of the Leningrad garrison. As a result, the 56th motorized corps was surrounded. Manstein recalled:

“It cannot be said that the position of the corps at that moment was very enviable ... The next few days were critical, and the enemy tried with all his might to maintain the encirclement” [8] .

By July 19, the Germans were thrown back 40 km, having stabilized the front at the turn of Porkhov - Dno - Staraya Russa. The losses of the 4th Panzer Group in men and materiel reached 50 percent. The German offensive was temporarily halted.

Lost Opportunity Analysis

According to the classical rule of military science, in order to conduct a successful offensive operation, it is necessary to create a triple superiority in manpower and equipment of the attacking side over the defending one. Army Group North did not have such superiority. On the contrary, the troops of the Baltic Special Military District twice outnumbered the enemy in the number of tanks and combat aircraft and had parity in artillery pieces and mortars. Only in manpower did the Germans have an advantage in the ratio of 1.8:1. Same as we see, far from overwhelming.

In the official Soviet history, the version that in the Red Army most of the tanks and aircraft were "obsolete", significantly inferior in terms of their tactical and technical characteristics to the German models, is very popular. This version is invariably offered to the reader's attention by all Soviet generals and marshals in their memoirs. For example, General of the Army S.M. wrote about this as follows. Shtemenko: “By the beginning of the war, we were still significantly inferior to the enemy in the number of modern tanks, did not have time to complete the re-equipment of troops with new equipment, to saturate the already formed and still being formed mechanized corps with powerful KB and T-34 even in the most responsible border districts - the Baltic, Western and Kiev Special, Odessa. These districts, which took the brunt of Nazi Germany, had a very small number of modern tanks. The old machines could not have a decisive influence on the course of the upcoming operations, and they were not enough here to the staff by half. The fact that the troops had few KB and T-34s was our misfortune ”[9] .

To clarify this issue to the end, it is necessary to compare the performance characteristics of the main medium and light tanks, which entered the battle on June 22, 1941 on both sides.

Of course, the Red Army had a lot of really outdated T-26 tanks, but still they were armed with 45-millimeter guns. G.K. Zhukov wrote: "The 45-millimeter cannon of the 1937 model could penetrate the armor of all types of vehicles that were in service at that time.

capitalist states"[10] . And if you remember that part of the German tank divisions were equipped with T-III tanks and Czech 38t tanks, which had 30 mm armor and 20 mm and 37 mm guns, then our T-26s could withstand them in battle. Therefore, the main reason for the defeats in the border battles was not so much the technical backwardness of the Red Army, but the erroneous decisions taken by the command. First of all, it should be said that even if all Soviet tank divisions

were armed exclusively with KB and T-34s, their combat use would still take place under the same obviously unfavorable conditions. First, from the very first day of the war, enemy aircraft dominated the air. Yes, not a single German tank could resist the KB and the "thirty-four". Yes, the shells of the main German 37 mm anti-tank guns did not penetrate their armor. Therefore, during the massive attacks of these newest tanks, the German command usually called in aviation. Secondly, in the first days of the war, the supply of Soviet troops, including tank ones, was disrupted. Warehouses of fuel and lubricants and ammunition, along with the armies of the first echelon, were moved close to the border. Thus, they became a very valuable trophy for the enemy. Many of our military leaders noted in their memoirs how tankers themselves had to blow up their tanks, left without fuel and ammunition. Especially if the tank division was surrounded.

The Red Army entered the war in an exceptionally unfavorable situation. This is known. There were many circumstances that led to this situation. In the opinion of AM Vasilevsky: "As a result of untimely bringing to combat readiness, the Armed Forces of the USSR entered into battle with the aggressor

in much less favorable conditions and were forced to retreat inland with battles. It would not be wrong to say that if the huge efforts aimed at the comprehensive strengthening of the military potential of the country were added to the timely mobilization and deployment of the Armed Forces, their transfer to a full combat position in the border districts, military operations would unfold in many ways differently.

In other words, if our military units and formations were mobilized in a timely manner, brought to the battle lines intended for them by the plan, deployed on them, organized clear interaction with artillery, tank troops and aviation, then we can assume that already in the first days of the war there were such losses would be inflicted on the enemy that would not allow him to advance so far in our country as he did. But we would have had to retreat, since the fascist German troops still had a number of serious advantages, including such as the militarization of the economy and the whole life of Germany, superiority in a number of indicators in armament and the number of troops and experience in warfare "[11] . The script, frankly, is quite controversial. The fact is that the battle lines intended for the troops were not properly —

prepared by the beginning of the war. Here is what G.K. wrote about this. Zhukov: "Regarding the new fortified areas, the People's Commissar of Defense and the General Staff repeatedly gave instructions to the districts to speed up construction. Almost 140,000 people worked daily to strengthen the new borders. I allow myself to quote one of the directives of the General Staff on this issue dated April 14, 1941:

"Despite a number of instructions from the General Staff of the Red Army, the installation of casemate weapons in long-term military structures and bringing the structures to combat readiness is unacceptable

at a slow pace.

The People's Commissar of Defense

ordered: All weapons available in the district for fortified areas should be urgently assembled into military installations and the latter brought to combat readiness.

In the absence of special weapons, temporarily install machine guns on field machines and, where possible, guns with a simple seal in the embrasure openings and boxes. Bringing structures into combat

readiness to produce, despite the absence of the rest of the standard equipment of structures, but with the mandatory installation of armored, metal and lattice doors. Organize the proper care and safety of the weapons installed in the facilities.

Immediately send technical instructions to the districts for the installation of temporary weapons in reinforced concrete structures to the head of the Defense Construction Department of the Red Army.

Report on the measures taken by 25.04.41 to the General Staff of the Red Army. pp. Chief of the General Staff of the Red Army General of the Army - **G. Zhukov** is

correct: Head of the Department of Fortified Areas of the General Staff Red Army Major General **S. Shiryayev.**"[12] . —

But even if the construction of the URs had been completed on time, the Germans still would not have stormed them. According to the basic principle of the strategy - the principle of concentration - they concentrated their main forces at the junction points between the fortified areas and hit there on June 22. As for the timely organization

of clear interaction with artillery, tanks and aircraft, in the current conditions of the deployment of troops, it could not be. Aviation almost completely died in the first hours of the war, mechanized corps and artillery anti-tank brigades in PribOVO were located several tens of kilometers behind the infantry units of the cover. They entered the battle after the defeat of the infantry divisions near the border.

However, the troops of the North-Western Front still had a real opportunity to win in the border battles. Despite the untimely combat readiness. Despite the dominance of German aircraft in the air. Despite the draconian orders of the commander-in-chief

Marshal K.E. Voroshilov attack at any cost. As you know, the critical situation of the

troops of the front developed on June 26, as a result of Manstein's breakthrough to Daugavpils. Nobody argues with the fact that Colonel-General F.I. Kuznetsov had to fulfill the requirements of the Headquarters of the High Command, set out in Directives No. 2 and No. 3. But this could have been done differently.

It is clear that the mechanized corps should have attacked in any case. They could be thrown against Reinhardt alone, or the 3rd mechanized corps could hit Manstein from the Raseiniai area on the flank - it didn't matter. But regardless of the outcome of this offensive operation, Kuznetsov should have given an order to the commander of the 27th Army, N.E. Berzarin immediately advance to the eastern bank of the Western Dvina, turn around and quickly prepare a well-fortified defense line. Similar orders were to be received by the commanders of the 8th and 11th armies: to allocate part of the sieves for organizing a powerful line along the Dvina line. Bridges across the river prepare for the explosion. On possible ways to break through the enemy's mobile groupings, of which there were only three - Daugavpils, Ekabpils, Riga, set up barriers. Vilnius, Siauliai and Kaunas, as front-line cities, prepare for evacuation.

In the current situation, no one could reproach Kuznetsov with such orders. The front commander, by virtue of his official duties, must foresee any options for the further development of the situation. After all, he put the 9th Artillery Brigade and the 202nd Mechanized Division in a barrier on the outskirts of Shauliai? What prevented doing the same in the other two threatening directions? Now let's see what could happen next. As you

know, the advanced units of the Reinhardt corps, having stumbled upon the barrier put up by Kuznetsov at Shauliai, were forced to conduct positional battles for two days. And then they took a detour. The front commander had other anti-tank artillery brigades at his disposal. Together with one or two regiments, for example, the 84th mechanized division, one of these brigades should have been deployed on the outskirts of Daugavpils. Manstein's tanks advancing along the Kaunas highway would inevitably run into our anti-tank

defense. No rapid breakthrough that cut the Northwestern Front in two would have been possible for the 56th German motorized corps. One or two days Manstein had to spend on breaking through the enemy's defenses or bypassing the knot of his resistance. Thus, time would be won for an organized, and not a chaotic, withdrawal of the main forces of the front behind the Dvina. Where, we recall, there was already a prepared defensive line, strong in a natural sense. Since the Germans would not be able to jump across the river on

the move, they would again have to spend time identifying vulnerabilities in our defense, preparing for crossing, concentrating troops at their starting points, etc. The North-Western Front would use this time to further strengthening the defense. Let's say the Germans managed to find some kind of gap. Along the entire front,

they begin diversionary fighting, targeting the Achilles' heel in our defenses with their main forces. But Colonel General F.I. Kuznetsov is not in the least worried about this. Why? Yes, because only 50–60 kilometers away, the powerful Pskov, Ostrov and Sebezh fortified areas cover his back. There, on the orders of the Headquarters of the High Command, the 5th airborne corps of Colonel I.S. Bezuglova, 21st Mechanized Major General D.D. Lelyushenko, as well as the 22nd, 41st rifle and 1st mechanized corps from the reserve of the Supreme High Command. On such a narrow stretch, German tanks have nowhere to accelerate and there is no operational scope for their actions. From the north, the belt of fortified areas is reliably covered by Lake Peipsi and Pskov, so it is impossible to bypass them. URs were built before the war, they are well equipped in engineering terms and applied to the terrain. Their configuration was calculated in such a way that the advancing enemy could not escape from a frontal assault. This is the Russian Mannerheim line.

So it would have turned out that the soldiers of Bezuglov and Lelyushenko did not have to choke on blood in suicidal attacks on Manstein's bridgeheads. On the contrary, they would sit in a solid defense, and the 56th motorized corps would be forced to ram our fortified areas with their foreheads. There would have been no delay in the exit of the reserve units to the Velikaya River and the capture of Pskov by the Germans on the move. There would not have been a swift breakthrough on Luga.

Let's again assume that the Germans were able to break through the defenses on the Pskov-Ostrov-Sebezh line. They are rushing to Leningrad. But by that time, a powerful, deeply echeloned Luga fortified area had already been prepared. The Germans are again forced to wage protracted battles, advancing only a few hundred meters a day. In just four to five days, they run out of steam. They have to stop the advance. Their troops, battered by previous assaults, are stretched out along the many-kilometer line of Russian defense. And at this moment, the troops of the North-Western Front are putting all their strength into a powerful strike. Recall the

numbers of German losses. By July 19, 1941, Hoepner's tank group alone was missing 50 percent of its tanks. This is in conditions when the first truly organized resistance was provided to the Germans at the Luga line. And if they had to break through another line on the Dvina and wash themselves with blood during the assaults on fortified areas on the old border? How many percent of the materiel would Göpner have left in this case? And how many tanks and fighters, in vain ruined in hastily organized counterattacks, would otherwise have survived with us? After all, these are the basics of military art: to wear down the enemy, bleed his troops and then inflict a crushing blow on him. Did the Northwestern Front have such an opportunity? Yes, there was. As you know, the Germans got

involved in the Eastern campaign without proper preparation. Everyone remembers from history how German soldiers froze near Moscow, because their command did not even take care of winter clothes. Equally deplorable was the situation with the reserves. Guderian wrote in his memoirs that for the whole of 1941 he did not receive a single tank from the reserve. Army Group

North also did not have a single tank in reserve. All her reserves were limited to five infantry divisions. The troops of the North-Western Front, on the contrary, constantly received tank reinforcements from the Kirov Plant. And not just any, but KB and T-34. In addition, 4 rifle divisions, 3 divisions of the people's militia, a rifle brigade and the Leningrad Infantry School were allocated from the Leningrad garrison to strengthen the front. Therefore, a blow to the exhausted and bloodless German troops

could be very strong. And the Germans would have fled from Leningrad not 40 kilometers, but ten times forty.

At first, Colonel-General Kuznetsov was inexcusably late with the withdrawal of troops beyond the Dvina. Then he hesitated again, missing the opportunity to gain a foothold in the fortified areas along the line of the old border. Major General Sobennikov, who replaced him, also did not have time to organize a timely defense in the URs. There were enough forces and means to stop the enemy. It was only necessary not to scatter them in senseless counterattacks. In a word, there really were opportunities to defeat the Germans in the North-West direction. But they were all missing out.

Chapter

2 Western front under the first blow

In September 1939, the Belostok ledge was created, which, like the tip of a giant spear, crashed into enemy territory. The peculiarities of its geographical position made the organization of defense very problematic. Of course, work on the construction of a belt of fortifications began even before the war on the new frontier in Western Belarus. But in itself, their construction by no means guaranteed reliable protection from troubles from a potential enemy. G.K. reported this to Stalin back in January 1941. Zhukov: "... Then I touched on the construction of fortified areas in Belarus.

- In my opinion, in Belarus, the fortified lines of the UR are being built too close to the border and they have an extremely unfavorable operational configuration, especially in the area of the Bialystok ledge. This allows the enemy to strike from the area of Brest and Suwalki to the rear of our entire Bialystok grouping. In addition, due to the shallow depth, the URs cannot hold out for a long time, as they are shot through by artillery fire. I think that it would be necessary to build URs somewhere deeper. - And in Ukraine, URs are built correctly? asked D.G.

Pavlov, apparently, is unhappy that I criticize his constituency.

- I did not choose the boundaries for the construction of URs in Ukraine, but I believe that there, too, it would be necessary to build them further

from the border. – Fortified areas are being built according to approved plans of the Main Military Council," K.E. sharply objected. Voroshilov.

Since the controversy began, I stopped speaking and sat down .

So somewhere in the controversy drowned the most important strategic issue. Troops then continued to march into the Bialystok ledge, airfields were built there, warehouses were built. Why - gives the answer in his memoirs AM Vasilevsky: "It was inappropriate in

in the immediate vicinity of the new border to build airfields in 1940-1941 and place military depots. The General Staff and the persons directly in charge of the supply and maintenance of the life and combat activities of the troops in the People's Commissariat of Defense considered it most expedient to have the main reserves away from the state border, approximately on the line of the Volga River, by the beginning of the war. Some people from the leadership of the people's commissariat [especially G.I. Kulik, L.3. Mekhlis and E.A. Shchadenko] categorically objected to this. They believed that aggression would be quickly repulsed and that the war would in all cases be transferred to enemy territory. Apparently, they were in captivity of a misconception about the course of the proposed war. Such an illusion, unfortunately, took place. From this thesis, some have drawn the wrong conclusion that the actions of the Soviet troops will necessarily be from the very beginning only of an offensive and, moreover, certainly successful character, and if so, then the warehouses should already be moved closer to the troops in peacetime. Consequently, they should be deployed, in preparation for war, on the territory of the new border regions"[14] .

Of course, nothing could be proven to people like Mekhlis and Kulik. Therefore, they preferred not to contact them. Only years after the war, G.K. Zhukov was able to complain: "On the eve of the war, the 10th Army and a number of other parts of the Western District were located in the Bialystok ledge, arched towards the enemy. The 10th Army occupied the most unfavorable position. Such an operational configuration of troops created a threat of deep envelopment and encirclement from the side of Grodno and Brest by striking at the flanks. Meanwhile, the deployment of front troops in these directions was not deep enough and powerful enough to prevent a breakthrough here and the coverage of the Bialystok grouping. This erroneous disposition of troops, admitted in 1940, was not eliminated until the war itself . Directly in the —

ledge, the 10th Army was stationed under the command of Major General K.D. Golubev. It included the 1st and 5th rifle, 6th cavalry, 6th and 13th mechanized corps, the 155th separate rifle division, and the 7th mobile artillery and anti-tank brigade.

On the right flank was the 3rd Army, commanded by Lieutenant General V.I. Kuznetsov. It was deployed in the Grodno-Avgustov-Graevo area. The army included the 4th and 21st rifle and 11th mechanized corps.

The left flank in the Brest region was provided by the 4th Army of Major General AA Korobkov. It included the 28th Rifle Corps and the 14th Mechanized Corps. In total, the Western Military District had more than 3,000 tanks, 2,200 combat aircraft and 15,000 artillery pieces and mortars. The ZapOVO troops were

opposed by the Army Group Center. It consisted of the

2nd and 3rd Panzer Groups, commanded respectively by Generals Guderian and Goth, as well as the 4th Army of Field Marshal von Kluge and the 9th Army of Colonel General Strauss. In total, the Germans had about 2,200 tanks, 1,700 combat aircraft, more than 15,000 guns and mortars. Only in manpower did they outnumber the enemy in a ratio of 2.2:1.

The scheme of actions of the German army was prompted by the deployment of enemy units. Pavlov's troops had more tanks, but almost all of them were in the ledge. Therefore, the Germans concentrated their powerful strike groups on the flanks. The main blows were inflicted bypassing the strongest parts of the Russians, and in their directions the German troops managed to create a three-fourfold superiority. On June 22, at 03:15,

concentrated artillery fire hit Brest. Stationed in the Southern town [2 kilometers from the border] the 22nd tank division of Major General V.P. Puganova, not having time to fire a single shot, suffered heavy losses. There were six bridges across the Bug in the Brest region, and none of them could be blown up. And by no means because of the sudden, treacherous attack of the Nazi invaders. In his memoirs, the former chief of staff of the 4th Army, L.M. Sandalov exhaustively explained this issue: "It was somehow unnatural to blow up bridges on the border with a state that signed a non-aggression pact with us. Not wanting to show tactlessness towards the Germans, we did not even dare to mine the crossings. General Guderian was no doubt very grateful

Russians for their tact, when on June 22 he comfortably ferried his tank group across the river.

As a result, the troops assigned to cover the Brest SD were defeated in a matter of two or three hours and did not even have time to advance to the fortifications. Only in the Brest Fortress did individual rifle units manage to gain a foothold. Heinz Guderian recalled: "All along the front of the tank group, we caught the enemy by surprise. South of Brest, the 27th motorized corps captured the bridges across the Bug intact. To the north-west of the fortress, we built our own bridges, in accordance with the plan. The enemy soon recovered from the surprise and began a fierce defense. The Brest Fortress defended itself with amazing stubbornness for several days. But the defense of the Brest Fortress could not detain the mobile German units that were bypassing it from the north and from the south. "By evening," Guderian wrote further, "the tank group was fighting in the vicinity of Malorita, Kobrin and Pruzhany. The last mentioned place became the scene of the first tank battle of the campaign"[18].

Meanwhile, long, painful reflections were going on in the Kremlin. At 0430 hours, members of the Politburo, the people's commissar of defense and the chief of the General Staff gathered in Stalin's office. Some time passed between Molotov's conversation with the German ambassador and his appearance in Stalin's office with the news of the declaration of war. Next, the word G.K. Zhukov: "I.V. Stalin sank into a chair and thought deeply. There was a long, painful pause. I ventured to break the protracted silence and suggested that all the forces available in the border districts immediately fall upon the enemy units that had broken through and delay their further advance.

"Not to delay, but to destroy," S.K. specified. Timoshenko. "Give us a directive," said I.V. Stalin"[19].

The text of the directive read:

"To the Military Councils of the LBO, PribOVO, ZAPOVO, KO VO, OdVO.

Copy: People's Commissar of the Navy. On June 22, 1941, at 4 o'clock in the morning, German aviation, without any reason, raided our airfields and

cities along the western border and bombarded them. At the same time, German troops opened artillery fire in different places and crossed our border. In connection with the German attack on the Soviet Union, unheard of in its arrogance, I order:

Troops to attack the enemy forces with all their strength and means and destroy them in areas where they violated the Soviet border. From now on, until further notice by the ground forces, do not cross the border.

Reconnaissance and combat aviation to establish the places of concentration of enemy aviation and the grouping of his ground forces. Destroy aircraft at enemy airfields and bomb the main groupings of his ground forces with powerful strikes by bomber and ground attack aircraft. Apply air strikes to a depth of 100–150 kilometers. Do not make any raids on the territory of Finland and Romania until special instructions"[20] . However, regarding this directive, G.K. Zhukov remarked: "At 7:15 a.m., the directive of the People's Commissar of Defense No. 2 was handed over to the districts. But in terms of the correlation of forces and the prevailing situation, it turned out to be clearly unrealistic, and therefore was not put into practice."[21] .

True, the troops did not know that the directive was clearly unrealistic. As for its implementation, Stalin sent representatives of the Headquarters of the High Command to look after this. At about 1 pm on June 22, Marshals G.I. Kulik and B.M. flew to the Western Front as such. Shaposhnikov. A few hours ago, Commander General of the Army D.G. Pavlov had already managed to give his troops the order: "Act in combat." While the Red Army was preparing

to fall on enemy forces and destroy enemy aircraft at airfields, the Germans continued to wedge deep into the territory of Belarus. The most unfavorable situation developed on the right flank of the Western Front. The 3rd Panzer Group struck at the empty junction between the troops of Pavlov and Kuznetsov. In the border zone, several rifle battalions that managed to take up firing positions were immediately

swept away by a German tank avalanche. Having repulsed an unorganized counterattack on the western bank of the Neman, Goth's tanks jumped over the bridges captured on the move and then advanced 100 kilometers without interference. By the evening of June 22, the 3rd Army remained far behind them. And in the areas of Augustow and Bialystok, the German infantry undertook diversionary attacks, aimed at pinning down the main enemy forces. G.K. reported what was happening in the troops on the first day of hostilities. Zhukov, First Deputy Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant-General N.F. Vatutin: "By the end of June 22, despite the energetic measures taken, the General Staff was still unable to receive accurate data about our troops and the enemy from the headquarters of the fronts, armies and the Air Force. Information about the depth of enemy penetration into our territory is rather contradictory. There are no accurate data on losses in aviation and ground forces. The General Staff and People's Commissar cannot contact the front commanders, Colonel-General F.I. Kuznetsov and Army General D.G. Pavlov, who, without reporting to the people's commissar, left for the troops somewhere. The headquarters of these fronts do not know where their commanders are at the moment. An attempt by the headquarters of the fronts to contact the troops directly was not successful, since there was neither wire nor radio communication.

with most of the armies and individual corps. In such an environment, the Western Front set about fulfilling the tasks set by Directives No. 2 and No. 3. Marshal Kulik, together with the deputy front commander, Lieutenant General I.V. Boldin flew into the Bialystok ledge for the speedy organization of the offensive. Received an order to drive the Germans out of Brest and General Korobkov. He was able to put his troops in order only by the morning of June 23. At 6 o'clock the 30th Panzer Division of Colonel S.I. Bogdanov, the remnants of the 22nd Tank Corps and the 28th Rifle Corps of Major General BC Popov launched an offensive. The German 18th Panzer Division took up the oncoming battle, while their 17th Panzer Division outflanked the enemy from the north and attacked the rear. The Soviet troops mixed up and began to randomly retreat to Kobrin, exposing the flank and rear of the 10th Army. Guderian immediately threw his tanks into the gap that had formed, towards Slonim and Baranovich. Goth's tanks at that time were already approaching Molodechno.

In pursuance of the directives of the Headquarters, General Boldin formed a cavalry mechanized group from parts of the 3rd and 10th armies as part of the 6th mechanized corps of Major General M.G. Khatskilevich, 6th Cavalry Corps Major General I.S. Nikitin and the 11th mechanized corps of the 3rd army. With a flank attack on Bialystok, he hoped to defeat the 20th German army corps. But there was no communication with the 3rd Army, and the units of the 10th, intended for the offensive, turned out to be scattered at a considerable distance from each other. Therefore, the troops were brought into battle one by one, without the organization of reconnaissance, communications and interaction. G.K. Zhukov described this battle as follows:

“On June 23, a counterattack was delivered to the flank of the enemy grouping that had broken through from the Suvalkovsky ledge. Success has not been achieved. I.V. Boldin failed to concentrate all the connections for a counterattack. The reason was the dispersion, the enemy fettered the initiative of our troops.

On June 23, the 11th mechanized corps under the command of Major General D.K. was actually active here. Mostovenko. The 6th Mechanized Corps, defending as part of the 10th Army on the Narew River, could not concentrate in time for a counterattack. While he was taken out of battle and collected, time was lost. Parts of the 6th cavalry corps, which were under continuous attacks from enemy aircraft, suffered heavy losses and lingered on the march. During June 24, a fierce battle unfolded in the Grodno region. The command of the

Army Group "Center" was forced to throw here two more army corps and turn some parts of the 2nd Panzer Group. Bloody battles continued on the 25th, but due to the lack of proper material and technical supply, the troops of the

counterattack group were unable to effectively conduct an offensive battle. During the fighting, they suffered significant losses and began to retreat. The tankers did not manage to completely withdraw the materiel from the battle: at that moment there was not enough required amount of fuel. Commander M.G. did not return from this battle. Khatskilevich ... General I.S. did not leave the battle either. Nikitin, who deservedly had a reputation as an intelligent, strong-willed and brave commander of the cavalry corps .

As for the turn of parts of the 2nd Panzer Group to Grodno, Heinz Guderian clarifies this issue: “I arrived at the arena of the military

actions of the 29th motorized infantry division, which was faced with the task of stopping the Russian offensive on Slonim. Thus, the main forces of the 17th and 18th armored divisions were freed and could continue the offensive on Minsk. Early in the morning of June 26, I visited the front in the area of the 47th motorized corps, because I wanted to personally observe the progress of our offensive on Baranovichi and Stolbtsy ... At 12.30, a report came from the 24th motorized corps about the capture of Slutsk. This operation was an example of the remarkable work of both commanders and privates. I sent a congratulatory radiogram to the corps commander... After lunch, a report arrived that Goth was 30 kilometers north of Minsk . "[24]

On June 26, Hoth's tanks entered Molodechno, and the 17th Panzer Division from Guderian's group broke into Stolbtsy. The Germans came close to Minsk and the Slutsk fortified area. To meet them, the Headquarters of the High Command advanced the 13th Army. Finally, in Moscow they figured out to give the front commander an order to withdraw the 3rd and 10th armies. But time has been lost. The 2nd and 3rd Panzer Groups had already created an outer ring. On June 27, parts of the 9th German Army, Colonel General Strauss, joined north of Slonim with the 4th Army of Field Marshal von Kluge. 11 Russian divisions were surrounded.

The level of command and control of the troops can be judged from a fragment of a telephone conversation between the chief of the General Staff and the chief of staff of the Western Front dated June 28:

Zhukov. Report what is known about the 3rd, 10th and 4th armies, in whose hands Minsk, where is the

enemy? **Klimovskikh. Minsk** is still ours... Communication with the 3rd Army could not be established by radio. The enemy, according to the latest reports, was in front

of U Rum. **Zhukov. Where are** Kulik,

Boldin, Korobkov? **Klimovskikh.** There are no messages from Kulik and Boldin. **Zhukov.**

Where is the heavy artillery? **Klimovskikh.** We have no data on the 375th ran and the 120th ran. **Zhukov. Where is**

the cavalry, the 13th, 14th and 17th mechanized corps? **Klimovskikh. 13th** mechanized corps in Stolbtsy. A few tanks remained in the 14th mechanized corps, joined the 17th. There is no information about the whereabouts of the cavalry.

Zhukov. Where is the enemy now?

Klimovskikh. The enemy moved from Slutsk to Bobruisk, but to In the evening Bobruisk was not busy yet. **Zhukov. How** to understand "has not been busy yet"? **Klimovskikh. We** believed that the enemy would try to break into Bobruisk on our shoulders. It didn't —

happen . "[25] Much worse happened a few hours later that day. The German 20th Panzer Division, breaking through the positions of the 64th Rifle Division stretched out on a 50-kilometer front west of Minsk and repelling a counterattack by the 100th and 161st divisions of the 2nd Rifle Corps, broke into the capital of Belarus. Developing a further offensive, Goth's tankers, by the end of June 28, connected with parts of the 47th motorized corps of Guderian's tank group. Most of the troops of the 13th Army fell into the "bag". Thus, the number of surrounded Soviet divisions reached 26.

And the chief of the General Staff continued to make titanic efforts to clarify the situation: "At 6 hours 45 minutes on June 30, I had a conversation on Bodo with the front commander, General of the Army D.G. Pavlov.

Zhukov. We cannot

make any decision on the Western Front without knowing what is happening in the areas of Minsk, Bobruisk, Slutsk ... **Pavlov. Near** Minsk, the 44th

Rifle Corps retreats south of the Mogilev Highway... In the Slutsk region, the 210th Motorized Rifle Division fought all day yesterday... In the Bobruisk region, the enemy built a bridge today at 4 o'clock. **Zhukov. The** Germans are radioing that

two armies are surrounded by them east of Bialystok. Apparently, there is some truth in this ... Where are Kulik, Boldin, Kuznetsov? Where is the corps? **Pavlov. Yes**, a lot of truth.

We know that on June 25 and 26, units were on the Shchara River ... The 21st Rifle Corps was in the Lida region, they had radio contact with this corps, but since yesterday there has been no communication, the corps is breaking through from the encirclement ... Aviation cannot find the cavalry and mechanical units ... A group was sent with a radio station with the task of finding out where Kulik was and where our units were located. There is no response from this group yet.

Zhukov. Under no circumstances should enemy units be allowed to break through in the area of Bobruisk and in the area of Borisov. You must in

by all means to prevent the disruption of the end of the concentration of our armies in the area of Orsha - Mogilev - Zhlobin - Rogachev.

Pavlov. To hold Bobruisk and Borisov, let's drop all parts, even school" [\[26\]](#).

On the same day Major General Model's 3rd Panzer Division crossed the Berezina north of Bobruisk. Avoiding encirclement, General Korobkov withdrew the remnants of the 4th Army defending the city, and the next day the Germans entered there. On the same June 30, the 18th Panzer Division of Major General Nering took the western part of Borisov and captured a bridgehead in the New City, on the eastern bank of the Berezina.

On July 1, Comrade Stalin lost his patience. By the decision of the State Defense Committee, the commander of the Western Front D.G. Pavlov, chief of staff V.E. Klimovskikh and other generals of the front department went to court. Commissar S.K. took command of the front. Timoshenko, N.F. was appointed chief of staff. Vatutin. On the line Vitebsk - Rogachev from the 19th, 20th, 21st and 22nd armies of the Reserve Front reorganized the new Western. In addition, in the rear, at the turn of Selizharovo - Smolensk - Roslavl - Gomel, it was planned to deploy the 24th and 28th armies of the Headquarters reserve, together with the reorganized 13th and the 16th army that had arrived from the southwestern direction. Zhukov's

gloomy list of defeated armies, corps, divisions did not include a single military unit. On July 2, the 1st Moscow Motorized Rifle Division under the command of Major General Ya.G. was thrown into the gaping gap near Borisov. Cruiser. Her tank battalion was armed with "thirty-four". Having launched their powerful tanks forward, the Muscovites with a friendly counterattack threw the Germans back to the bridgehead. But Nering was wrong to think that this new Russian general would put his entire division in heroic attacks against the well-organized German defenses. Cruiser did the opposite. He gave this honor to the enemy. While the 18th Panzer was breaking through or outflanking the line prepared by

Kreizer, in the rear his engineer battalion was preparing a new line of defense. Then the tanks and motorized infantry quickly retreated, ahead of the enemy and forcing him to again get involved in

protracted battle against well-fortified Russian positions. Thus, Nering did not succeed in a swift attack on Orsha.

“On the Berezina River, our troops fought especially stubbornly in the area of \u200b\u200bthe city of Borisov,” Zhukov noted, “by this time, the 1st Moscow Motorized Rifle Division, Major General Ya.G. Cruiser. The Moscow division was well prepared and was armed with T-34 tanks. General Ya.G. The cruiser managed to delay the reinforced 18th Panzer Division of the enemy for more than two days. It was important back then. In these battles, General Ya.G. The cruiser showed itself brilliantly”[27] . But Marshal —

Timoshenko acted as the enemy would very much like. When fighting began on the new front line on July 7, he launched the 5th and 7th mechanized corps, which included 1800 tanks, into the counteroffensive. According to established practice, the tank divisions of these corps were introduced into battle at random, without established communication and interaction with each other. And without the proper organization of intelligence. Accordingly, the Germans, maneuvering with their modest forces, clearly interacting with aviation and artillery, successfully coped with the task of repelling Tymoshenko's counterattack. It took them two days to completely defeat both mechanized corps in the Lepel-Seno-Vitebsk triangle. According to the memoirs of A.I. Yeremenko: “At first, their actions developed successfully ... The enemy pushed the 17th and 18th tank divisions here. For two days, our corps repelled the attacks of these formations, which delayed the advance of the entire 3rd tank group of the enemy to the Dnieper ” [28] during— . In this battle, the commander of the battery of the 14th howitzer artillery regiment of the 14th tank division of the 7th mechanized corps senior was captured

Lieutenant Yakov Dzhugashvili. On July 9, Goth's tanks took Vitebsk. The 24th motorized corps of Guderian on July 10 crossed the Dnieper north of Bykhov. On July 11, the 47th motorized corps crossed the Dnieper in the Kopys area. The German army opened a direct road to Smolensk.

Lost Opportunities

The basis of the Soviet military doctrine was developed by the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Red Army V.K. Triandafill's theory

deep offensive operation. In the memoirs of all the marshals of the Soviet Union, this theory is given the closest attention. Before the war, all commanders of the Red Army were brought up on the ideas of a swift offensive, which were expressed in the famous quatrain:

And on the enemy's
land We will defeat the
enemy, With little
blood, With a mighty blow!

G.K. Zhukov recalled: "Military strategy was built mainly on the correct assertion that only offensive actions can defeat the aggressor. At the same time, other variants of the struggle - oncoming battles, forced retreats, battles in encirclement conditions - were not considered thoroughly enough "[29] . That is why in the first days of the war, no one, from the chief of the General Staff to the commanders on the ground, was not able to refuse what was instilled in them for two decades in a row at the advanced training courses for command personnel, from the departments of military academies and the Academy of the General Staff, from the pages books by leading military theorists, in the editorials of Krasnaya Zvezda and the Bolshevik magazine, in films like If Tomorrow is War, at party conferences and all-army meetings. Even Stalin was completely accustomed to the idea that in a future war the Red Army would not mark time, but would immediately go forward. This is what explains Directives No. 2 and No. 3.

This is how the Bialystok ledge became a grave for the 3rd and 10th armies, which, alas, disappeared without any benefit in the encirclement. In such a situation, the question of command is extremely acute. A competent, cold-blooded, resolute commander in an environment is the salvation of tens of thousands of soldiers' lives and valuable military equipment. But it is very bad if a military unit, squeezed from all sides by the enemy, does not have centralized control and is torn apart from the inside by chaos in command. If on

The head of the commander sits first, a representative of the headquarters of the front, then a representative of the high command. And each with their own instructions.

Then - write wasted! Nikolai Gerasimovich Kuznetsov, Admiral of the Fleet of the Soviet Union, quite convincingly expressed his opinion on this matter: "Why was it so difficult to manage combat operations on the fronts at the beginning of the war? I

think, because there was no clear regulation of the rights and obligations among the high bosses and senior officials of the country. Meanwhile, it was they who had to know their place and the limits of responsibility for the fate of the state. After all, at that time we were already sure that in the upcoming war, military operations would begin from its very first hours and even minutes.

It seems to me that the system of visits to the fronts by representatives and representatives of the Stavka, which existed throughout the war, was wrong. Usually they were sent to one or another front before major operations, and there they often replaced commanders. This seemed to emphasize the lack of confidence in the organization of work on the fronts. Supports his assertion N.G. Kuznetsov is a concrete example - the terrible defeat of the Soviet troops on the Kerch Peninsula in April 1942, which led to huge and completely unjustified casualties. This tragedy occurred because the representative of Stavka L.3. Mekhlis replaced the commander of the Crimean Front D.G. Kozlov. But in addition to Mekhlis, the Stavka also sent Marshal S.M. Budyonny, which clearly did not add order. But a year earlier, such a tragic

incident took place on the Western Front. On June 22, Stalin sent two of his representatives there. Marshal G.I. undertook to "steer" the troops in the Bialystok ledge. Kulik, known for his stubborn execution of Stalin's instructions from letter to letter. Stalin's order was to advance! And although it seemed to be obvious to everyone that, due to the extremely unfavorable operational configuration in the current situation, the ledge was a trap, the troops still rushed into senseless counteroffensives. Which did not at all prevent the tankers of Goth and Guderian from squeezing deadly pincers behind their backs. Which, in turn, led to the disruption of the deployment of armies

second echelon and allowed the Germans to break into Smolensk on the move. As General Goth noted in his memoirs: "The German command was relieved of one concern that worried us before the war: the enemy did not even think about retreating to the vast Russian expanses"[31] .

It is interesting to trace the further career of Marshal G.I. Kulik: "At the beginning of the war, he was surrounded, somehow got out of it. Then he was sent as a representative of the Stavka to the south. Because he signed some rash orders, he was tried and reduced in rank. But, as far as I know, even this brought him to his senses a little. However, Kulik was more than replaced by other representatives of the Supreme Command

Headquarters until the very end of the war. June 27 at 10:05 am Chief of the General Staff G.K. Zhukov transmitted the order of the Headquarters of the High Command to the Chief of Staff of the Western Front V.E. Klimovsky to withdraw troops from the Bialystok ledge. By that time, the 3rd and 10th armies were drained of blood, lost most of their equipment, and the Germans created two rings around them - the inner one in the Slonim region and the outer one in the Molodechno-Stolbtsy region. More than 300 kilometers separated the encircled troops from the withdrawal points indicated by the Headquarters beyond the Polotsk and Minsk URs, while there was no question of any supply of fuel, ammunition, food, and medicines to make such a breakthrough. The Germans, on the other hand, continued to press energetically to the east. So what happened was what AM Vasilevsky wrote about: "At the end of June, the High Command tried to use the strategic reserves put forward from the depths of the country to deploy them on the borders of the Western Dvina and Dnieper rivers. However, the mobile large groups of the er

And now let's try to analyze the situation that would have developed on the Western Front if all the necessary measures were taken in a timely manner. There

is one very interesting episode in Guderian's memoirs: "We did not know that Hitler on that day [34] succumbed to fear that Russian troops would break out of their encirclement, and wanted to stop the advance of tank units and send them to the Bialystok region. Fortunately, in this case, the military command was able to insist on its right to stick to the original plan and complete

encircling the enemy with a throw in the direction of Minsk"[35]. But on that day, no one thought of any breakthrough from the encirclement in the Soviet headquarters. But Hitler is in a panic. It is clear why - after all, there were two and a half thousand Russian tanks in the ledge. God forbid, if all this power tramples to the east! Von Kluge's infantry divisions alone will not stop it. He was very afraid

of the power of the 3rd and 10th armies and Field Marshal von Kluge, who was subordinate to the 2nd Panzer Group. Heinz Guderian recalled: "There were fierce battles along the borders of the Bialystok pocket. Between June 26 and 30, the 71st regiment of the 29th motorized infantry division alone took 36,000 prisoners, which made it possible to judge what forces the Russians had at their disposal. This fact made a strong impression on the command of the 4th Army and aroused the desire that the encirclement of the boiler be carried out by the largest possible number of troops. In this regard, Field Marshal von Kluge canceled my order to send the 17th Panzer to Borisov, despite the fact that the 18th Panzer had already reached this city and installed bridgeheads on the Berezina, and also that from the connection of two divisions in the further advance of the 47th motorized corps to the Dnieper depended to a large extent on the area of these fortifications. For which Field Marshal von Kluge — . Dashing almost put him on trial. But Guderian confirmed his correctness with new brilliant victories. Could Generals Golubev and Kuznetsov do the same? Yes, they could. On June 22, the Headquarters had no connection with the 3rd

and 10th armies. Kulik and Boldin reached the ledge only on the morning of the 23rd. No one could prevent the commanders from throwing their troops not even into a breakthrough, but rather into a raid on enemy rear lines. The enemy would not have been able to do anything about it. "The 10th Army, not experiencing strong pressure from the enemy, was still fighting, relying on the Osovets fortified area," states G.K. Zhukov[37]. General Golubev could simply leave one, maximum two rifle divisions in the UR and with all the might of his mechanized and cavalry corps fall on the flanks or rear of Guderian. In this case, he would simply be forced to turn his tanks around and no swift attack on Minsk would have happened. Maybe the 10th Army doesn't care

would have died. But in this situation, with her death, she would have delayed the main enemy forces for several days, would have allowed the High Command to win time for the deployment of the 13th Army in the Minsk and Slutsk URs and for the deployment of second-echelon armies along the line of the Western Dvina and Dnieper rivers. With such a development of events, the Germans, in principle, would not have been able to capture Smolensk on the move.

The commander of the 3rd Army could act in much the same way. Yes, the infantry divisions of the German 9th Army pressed him from the front. But it wasn't fatal either. General Kuznetsov could put two or three rifle divisions on the defensive, and use his mechanized corps to strike at the Goth tank grouping. Of course, the 11th mechanized corps was inferior in power to the mechanized corps of Golubev's army. But in an hour or two, Goth would not have been able to defeat him anyway. The fighting would go on for a day, two, maybe three. So Goth's tanks would have approached Molodechno when a solid defense would have been organized on their way.

Let's consider another option. And on June 23, and on the 24th, the 3rd and 10th armies, in pursuance of the orders of the Stavka and its representative, would drive their mechanized corps after the German infantry. But in a critical situation it happens that the principle of expediency takes precedence over the principle of subordination. In conditions when the noose thrown by the enemy is tightened on the throat, it becomes not up to worshipping the genius of Comrade Stalin. Could the ten generals who were in the ledge agree on joint actions, bypassing one Marshal Kulik? We could. When death is in your eyes, you can't even do that. And there were only three things to do. First, to stop further infliction of senseless counterattacks on enemy infantry. Secondly, to gather the remaining troops into one fist. Thirdly, to hit the German ring with this fist.

Even if only half of all the troops remained, even if it took a day to collect them, a breakthrough could still be achieved. On the night of June 25-26, it was still possible. Because the inner ring in the Slonim area was closed by the 4th and 9th German armies only on June 27th. And Goth's tanks broke into Minsk on the 28th. But in the event of a real threat of a Russian breakthrough, the alarmed Hitler would have insisted on his order to stop the tanks and turn them towards Bialystok. So, even if, with such a turn of affairs, Goth would enter Minsk, then he could only leave part of his forces there and

the Soviet command thus appeared a convenient opportunity to knock him out of the city.

Let us turn again to Guderian's memoirs: "I imagined the next phase of the operation as follows: to destroy the Russian troops in the Bialystok pocket, it is necessary to allocate only the minimum necessary forces of my tank group, placing the main burden of the task on the infantry armies following us in order to free our rapidly moving motorized units to throw forward and capture the first operational target for the entire campaign - the Smolensk - Yelnya - Roslavl region. All my actions for the next few days were determined by these ideas, which were quite consistent with the orders originally given. I considered it essential for the successful outcome of the campaign as a whole to stick to the original plan, in spite of any unforeseen circumstances and turn of events. I was well aware that this was to some extent a risky plan. Field Marshal von Kluge spoke about the same to his subordinate: "Your operations

always hanging by a thread."

The following excerpt from the above-mentioned telegraph conversation between Zhukov and the Klimovskys on June 27 is very interesting in this sense: infantry moving without tanks. If only commanders subordinate to you can take over units, especially tank units, you can deliver a devastating blow both to defeat the first echelon and to defeat infantry moving without tanks. If possible, first organize a powerful strike against the rear of the first enemy mechanized echelon moving towards Minsk and Bobruisk, after which you can successfully turn against the infantry. Such a bold action would bring glory to the troops of the Western Front. Especially great success will be obtained if you manage to organize a night attack on the mechanical units.

Now, if such an order had been given three or four days earlier, then there would have been no price for him. And Guderian would have had to, willy-nilly, postpone his throw to the first operational goal until better times.

How would further hostilities develop on the Western Front? Of course, the 3rd and 10th armies would not have survived even if a decision was made in time to break through the salient. But they would have done the main thing: they would have forced the enemy to divert significant forces to fight them, which meant a serious weakening of his strikes in the main strategic direction. Parts of the 13th Army, which was advancing to the Minsk and Slutsk URs, in this case would have been opposed by more modest German forces. Thus, it became possible either to contain them on the outskirts of Minsk, or to knock out their cities with a counterattack by the same 1st Moscow Motorized Rifle Division. Be that as it may, but for some time the Germans would inevitably get stuck in the Minsk region, which would make it possible to carry out the most important event: to deploy second-echelon armies on a naturally strong line and organize a strong defense there. Suppose that, having dealt with the Bialystok

pocket, the Germans would have pulled up their main forces and were able to break through the defenses along the line of the Western Dvina and the Dnieper. It should be remembered that in terms of natural conditions - a lot of swamps, forests, a limited number of roads - the Belarusian theater of military operations is very similar to the Finnish one. The experience of the Finnish war by the Red Army was thoroughly studied. It was necessary to set up barriers on a few roads and act according to the enemy containment scheme, which was successfully used by the commander of the 1st Moscow motorized rifle division, Ya.G. Cruiser. In the forests, special sabotage detachments could be left with the task of striking at enemy communications, disturbing the rear of the enemy. General Blumentrit testified: "Our motorized troops fought along the roads or near them, and where there were no roads, the Russians in most cases remained out of reach"[40] . In the meantime, the Germans would break through the defenses on the Dnieper and overcome the barriers, a new line was already prepared on the Selizharovo-Smolensk-Roslavl line. Then it would only be necessary to wait until the enemy runs out of steam.

Such plans were indeed considered. G.K. Zhukov wrote: "In our assumptions, we proceeded from the main task - to create a defense in depth on the ways to Moscow, to exhaust the enemy and, stopping him at one of the defensive lines,

to organize a counteroffensive, gathering the necessary forces for this ... Where the enemy would be stopped, what to take as an advantageous starting point for the counteroffensive, what forces would be collected for

this, we did not yet know"[41] . Let us add that if, instead of inflicting counterattacks that were senseless in the current situation, decisions on the timely organization of defense were made that corresponded to the actual state of affairs, then the German offensive against Moscow could have failed much earlier than it actually happened

Chapter

3 The Beginning of the War on the Southwestern Front

According to the Thunderstorm plan, the southwestern strategic direction was defined as the main one, therefore more troops were concentrated on the territory of the Kyiv Special Military District than in the ZapOVO and PribOVO combined. A.M. Vasilevsky recalled: "Speaking of the alleged direction of the enemy's main attack, B.M. Shaposhnikov considered that the deployment of the main forces of the German army to the north of the mouth of the San River was the most advantageous for Germany, and therefore the most probable. Accordingly, the plan was supposed to deploy our main forces in the sectors of the North-Western and Western fronts ... However, when considering it, I.V. Stalin, referring to the most likely direction of the main attack of a potential enemy, expressed his point of view. In his opinion, in the event of war, Germany will try to direct its main efforts not in the center, but in the southwest, in order first of all to seize from us the richest industrial, raw material and agricultural regions. In accordance with this, the General Staff was instructed to revise the plan, providing for the concentration of the main grouping of our troops in the South-Western direction .

Moreover, on the eve of the war, the grouping of Soviet troops in the south westward steadily increased.

Marshal I.Kh. Bagramyan, at that time the head of the operational department of the headquarters of the Kiev Special Military District, recalled: "In the second half of May, we received a directive from the General Staff, in which the command of the district was ordered to accept from the North Caucasian Military District and place in the camps the command of the 34th Rifle Corps with corps units, four 12,000-strong rifle and one mountain rifle divisions ...

At the end of May, trains after trains began to arrive in the district. The operational department turned into a kind of control center, where all the information about the movement and condition of the troops received from the North Caucasus Military District flowed ...

No sooner had five divisions from the North Caucasian Military District completed their concentration on the territory of our district than in the first days of June the General Staff announced that the Directorate of the 19th Army had been formed by directive of the People's Commissar of Defense, which would arrive in Cherkassy by June 10. The army will include all five divisions of the 34th Rifle Corps and three divisions of the 25th Rifle Corps of the North Caucasus Military District. It was headed by the commander of the North Caucasian Military District, Lieutenant General I.S. Konev.

A day later, the General Staff warned the district command to prepare to receive and deploy another one - the 16th Army of Lieutenant General M.F. Lukin, transferred from Transbaikalia. The plan provided for the concentration of General Lukin's troops on the territory of the Kyiv Special Military District in the period from June 15 to July 10. So, we had to accept the second

army as soon as possible and place it on the territory of the district. It pleased. The fear that in the event of war we would not be in the depths of the troops fell away by itself. Now it has become quite clear that the People's Commissar and the General Staff took care of this, giving the order to prepare for the advancement of all the forces of the district directly to the border . Looking —

ahead, it should be noted that the head of the operational headquarters of the KOVO rejoiced prematurely. After June 22, all these troops were taken from the district. "In the very first days of the war," wrote G.K. Zhukov, - the 19th Army, a number of units and formations of the 16th Army, previously concentrated in Ukraine and pulled up there recently, had to be transferred to the western direction and included on the move in battles as —

part of the Western Front "[44] . Nevertheless, there were still more troops on the Southwestern Front than on other fronts. It is not surprising that on June 22 the Germans were unable to make a deep breakthrough in this direction. And the 9th and 18th armies of the Southern Front, against which the much less combat-ready Romanian troops mainly acted, held out in Bessarabia for

three whole weeks. The troops of Army Group South, which were to act directly in the southwestern direction, included the 1st Panzer Group of Field Marshal von Kleist, the 6th and 17th

armies under the command of Field Marshal von Reichenau and Colonel General von Stülpnagel, respectively. In total, they were armed with about 1,200 tanks, 1,200 combat aircraft, 16,000 guns and mortars. At the same time, the German 11th [7 infantry divisions], which were subordinate to the commander of the South group, Field Marshal Gerd von Runstedt, were only supposed to hold back the Soviet troops in the south, because Hitler and his generals had no illusions about their allies. The KOVO troops that opposed the invasion forces in the first echelon had the 5th, 6th, 12th and 26th armies. Together with the 9th and 18th

armies, they could field 8,000 tanks, 4,500 combat aircraft, 26,500 guns and mortars on the battlefield. In manpower, the ratio with the enemy was almost equal. The scheme of operations of the Army Group "South" in general corresponded to the plan of the "Barbarossa" plan. The Germans concentrated their strike forces in narrow

areas and delivered the main blows to the vulnerable places of the enemy's defense. At the junction between Vladimir Volynsky and Strumilovsky fortified areas, the 1st tank group was supposed to make a breakthrough. The mobile tank-motorized units of the 17th Army were to break through at the junction between the Rava-Russky and Przemyslsky URs. At the same time, part of the German infantry divisions were allocated for frontal attacks in order to pin down the defending units of the Red Army. On the morning of June 22, von Kleist's tanks successfully broke through at the junction of the 57th and 124th rifle divisions, which, as was the case almost

everywhere, did not have time to advance to the border fortifications. Thus, a gap was formed between the 5th and 6th Soviet armies, where the German command began to quickly introduce motorized troops. By the end of the day, the Germans took Sokal. At the same time, the commander of the 5th Army, Major General M.I. Potapov did not have the opportunity to concentrate his 22nd mechanized corps to localize the German breakthrough throughout the day, since his units were at a considerable distance from each other. As for the frontal attacks of the German infantry on the URs, they were everywhere

repulsed by soldiers of the 15th Rifle Corps, Major General I.I. Fedyuninsky.

On the left flank of the Southwestern Front, the fighting developed somewhat differently. On the site of the Rava-Russian fortified area, the border detachment of Major Ya.D. managed to take up firing positions. Small, 35th and 140th separate machine-gun battalions and the 41st rifle division of Major General G.N. Mikushev. Therefore, the five German infantry divisions that stormed the UR immediately ran into fierce resistance. Rifle units were supported by two artillery regiments of the 41st division. Then, around 2 pm on June 22, the defenses organized here were strengthened by the approaching batteries of the 209th corps artillery regiment, which was armed with 152-millimeter guns. The enemy failed to complete the combat mission of the day - to take Rava-Russkaya. The 92nd border detachment, the 52nd and 150th

separate machine-gun battalions defended themselves in the zone of the Przemyśl UR. Initially, the Germans had some success in this sector and took Przemyśl in the afternoon. But the 99th Rifle Division of Colonel N.I. was brought up to the city. Dementieva. A joint counterattack by riflemen and border guards managed to drive the Germans out of Przemyśl and push them back to their original positions.

Nevertheless, at the junction of the Rava-Russian and Przemyśl fortified areas, the Soviet defense was broken through. The 14th German motorized corps knocked down the 97th and 159th Russian rifle divisions from their positions. The 159th Division began a hasty retreat, exposing the flank of the 6th Army. By the end of the day on June 22, there was a gap between the 6th and 26th armies about 15 kilometers wide.

Commander of the 6th Army, Lieutenant General I.N. Muzychenko decided to use the forces of the 4th mechanized corps to launch a counterattack on the enemy that had broken through. But the main problem was that on June 22 the mechanized corps was stretched along the entire front of the army and it took at least a day to assemble it. Since the commander's headquarters received reports from the commanders of rifle divisions who were under a strong emotional impact of the first battles about the superior forces of the enemy, Muzychenko scattered his tanks in all threatening directions. Accordingly, the organization of the counterattack was carried out in a fire order. There was no exact information about the

there was no time to conduct thorough reconnaissance, there was no air cover, communication was constantly broken. Therefore, those tanks that managed to be assembled rushed into battle without interaction and without infantry support. "Undertaken by the commander of the 6th Army, General I.N. Muzychenko's countermeasures did not improve the situation. And by the end of June 24, the gap in defense reached 40 kilometers here," stated G.K. Zhukov[45]. Nevertheless, the 41st and 99th Rifle Divisions continued to successfully defend themselves in the fortified areas for

another five days. On the whole, however, the situation at the front worsened more and more. G.K. Zhukov recalled: "At 5 p.m. on June 24, I had a conversation on Bodo with the commander of the 5th Army, General M.I. Potapov.

Zhukov. Submit the situation.

Potapov. Up to five infantry divisions and up to two thousand tanks operate on the Vladova-Ustilug front [in total, Kleist had 700 of them. - Auth.]. At the junction between the 5th and 6th armies, a mechanical unit of an unidentified force. The enemy delivers the main blow in the direction of Vladimir-Volynsky - Lutsk ... I report the position of our army units at 14.20 24.6.41. The 87th Rifle Division occupies the URs in the Ustiluga area with two regiments and is fighting in the encirclement. I have no information about the 124th division since yesterday evening. After the battle, the 41st Panzer Division puts the materiel in order... The main thing I fear is an attack by enemy tank units from the south in the direction of Lutsk. I have absolutely no strength to fend off a blow in a southerly direction ... I ask you to increase assistance with the actions of bomber aircraft, attack and fighter aircraft in the destruction of the enemy's Vladimir-Volyn grouping ... I have no reserves. The 9th mechanized corps has up to two hundred old tanks. Telephone communication has been destroyed everywhere ... I ask for instructions on further actions. Zhukov ... Muzychenko

is leading successful battles north of Kamenka Strumilovskaya, Rava-Russkaya and further along the state border. The enemy, having introduced a powerful group of tanks, tore the junction between the 5th and 6th armies and is striving to capture Brody ... Measures will be taken with regard to aviation. Nothing has been received or decoded from you on the radio ... Close the approaches to Kovel from the north, do not rush from

rifle divisions in counterattacks without tanks. For this will not give anything ... Approximately how many tanks did the enemy lose on your front? **Potapov.** The 14th air division is subordinate to me, which by the morning of today had 41 aircraft. The order from the front states that the 62nd and 18th bomber divisions are covering us. Where they are - I do not know, I have no connection with them. There are 30 large KB tanks. All of them without shells for 152-mm guns ... About a hundred enemy tanks were destroyed. **Zhukov.** The

152 mm KB guns fire 1909-30 shells, so order the 1909-30 concrete-piercing shells to be immediately issued and put into action. You will beat enemy tanks with might and main ... Otherwise, we will organize help. Goodbye". [\[46\]](#)

— .

On this day, the command of the Southwestern Front and the representative of the Headquarters of the High Command G.K. Zhukov planned a counter-offensive in pursuance of Directive No. 3 in order to defeat the enemy grouping in the Lutsk-Dubno-Brody region. Zhukov himself assessed this document as follows: "General N.F. Vatutin said that I.V. Stalin approved the draft Directive No. 3. What kind of directive is this? I asked. - The directive provides for the transition of our troops to counter-offensive operations with the task of defeating the enemy in the main directions, moreover, with access to enemy territory.

"But we still don't know exactly where and with what forces the enemy is delivering his blows," I objected, "wouldn't it be better to figure out what is happening on the fronts before morning. And then make the right decision . "[47] Nevertheless, no one began to understand anything, on June 22 Directive No. 3 was transferred to the troops, and G.K. Zhukov was sent to monitor its implementation as a representative of the Headquarters on the

Southwestern Front. From the Soviet side, powerful forces were thrown into the battle. The 4th, 8th, 9th, 15th, 19th and 22nd mechanized corps acted against the Kleist tank group. At the same time, parts of the 15th mechanized corps were already drawn into the fighting, while all the rest were only concentrating or were just moving forward into the areas of concentrati

In the period from June 24 to July 2 inclusive, fierce tank battles flared up in the Lutsk-Dubno-Brody triangle. By the end of June 29, it became obvious to the Soviet command that the counteroffensive had failed. The mechanized corps lost 75-80 percent of the materiel, and therefore it was decided to take them out of the battle as far as possible. On June 30, the Germans captured Kovel, Lutsk and Rovno. Their troops were not weakened enough to stop further advance. Although the German advance on this sector of the front slowed down. Before moving forward, Kleist had to regroup.

Equally unfavorable was the situation on the left flank. On June 27, the rifle units of the 6th and 26th armies, being under the threat of encirclement, left the fortified areas. At the junction between these two armies, large mobile units of the enemy freely operated. On June 29, the Red Army left Lvov.

Seeing no real opportunity to create a solid defense in the border zone, the commander of the Southwestern Front, M.P. Kirponos gave the order to start preparing a defensive line along the line of the old border. But on July 2, the 14th German motorized corps made a swift breakthrough and broke into Ternopil. Thus, the Germans violated the control of the troops of the 6th Army, went to the rear of the 26th and 12th armies. The gap in the front line in this area reached almost 60 kilometers. Given the sad experience of similar cases on the

Northwestern and Western fronts, the Stavka sent an order to Kirponos to break away from the enemy and gain a foothold in Novograd Volynsky, Korostensky, Starokonstantinovsky and Proskurov U Pax in order to contain the Germans on the old border. P.A. Rotmistrov recalled: "The troops of the front had to retreat 120-200 km within seven days. The retreat was planned along the lines at a rate of 25–35 km per day. The general retreat of the front troops took place in the conditions of a lack of ammunition and fuel and lubricants [the ammunition depots and fuel and lubricants were located near the border and were captured by the Germans. - Auth.], under the continuous influence of enemy aircraft. This led to the fact that our units were often forced [48] to burn or blow up precious military equipment "

The German command could not fail to notice the general withdrawal of the Russian troops. Rundstedt ordered Kleist to get ahead of the enemy in order not to allow him to gain a foothold on lines favorable for long-term defense. Knocking down separate Russian barriers, the German 11th Panzer Division broke into Shepetovka on July 4. At the same time, the units of the 7th Rifle Corps that advanced to the Shepetovsky UR were forced to engage in battle on the move and therefore fell under the rout. Developing a further offensive, the 11th Panzer crossed the Sluch and Teterev rivers and captured Berdichev on July 8. In the north, the German 13th Panzer Division, bypassing the Novograd-Volynsky UR, entered Zhitomir. German tanks straddled the highway to Kyiv and were preparing for a direct attack. They were only 131 kilometers away from the capital of Ukraine. The command of the Southwestern Front was well aware of the threat looming over Kiev. Kleist's tanks, rushing into the

breakthrough, managed to pass more than 100 kilometers along the Zhytomyr highway. But they ran into the first line of the Kyiv fortified area, where our troops were advanced in advance, and could not advance further. On July 9, the 5th Army launched a strong flank attack on the enemy's extended units. CM. Shtemenko noted: "The 5th Army, led by Major General M.I. Potapov, firmly held Polesie and the area adjacent to it. She offered the strongest resistance to the enemy and inflicted significant damage on him. The fascist German troops here failed to quickly break through the front. Potapov's divisions knocked them off the Lutsk-Rivne-Zhytomyr road and forced them to abandon an immediate attack on Kiev .

From the south, Muzychenko's army, reinforced by the 16th mechanized corps, which had approached from the reserve, launched a counterattack against the German troops that had broken through. The Germans also threw cash reserves on the near approaches to Kyiv. As a result, protracted battles unfolded on the line Korosten - Irpen - Skvira with varying success, which continued almost two weeks.

By the end of July 19, the troops of Army Group South were forced to go on the defensive. They needed some time to regroup and make up for significant losses. The command of the Southwestern Front was able to buy time to further strengthen the defense of Kyiv.

Lost Opportunities

The situation on the first day of the war on the Southwestern Front differed significantly from that which developed on the Northwestern and Western fronts. The enemy failed to "cut off" the Lvov ledge as he did with the Bialystok ledge. Troops M.P. Kirponos did not have to make that disastrous chaotic retreat, which was fully experienced by the armies of F.I. Kuznetsova. On the first day of the war in the southwestern direction, the Germans were able to drive their tank wedges to a depth of only 15-20 kilometers. Therefore, the Soviet troops and command had time to recover from the shock associated with the operational surprise of the German attack, to recover, calmly assess the situation and make informed decisions.

Is it possible to agree with the statements of our military leaders about the inevitability of catastrophic defeats in frontier battles? In their memoirs, they name a number of factors, the cumulative effect of which created the fatal inevitability of everything that happened in June-July 1941. In their opinion, the maximum potential of the troops subordinate to them, under hypothetically more favorable conditions for entering the war, is to inflict losses on the enemy greater than he actually suffered. A clear example of this point of view can be found in the memoirs of G.K. Zhukova: "History really gave us too little peace time to put everything in its place. We started a lot of things right and we didn't finish a lot of things. A miscalculation in the assessment of the possible time of the attack by fascist Germany had an effect. Omissions were associated with this in preparation for repelling the first strikes. Positive factors acted constantly, unfolding more widely and more powerfully, throughout the war, from

the first to the last day - and determined the victory. The negative factor - a miscalculation in time - acted, gradually fading, but extremely sharply aggravated the objective advantages of the enemy, added temporary advantages to them - and thereby determined our difficult situation at the beginning of the war.

During the period of the brewing of a dangerous military situation, we, the military, probably did not do everything to convince I.V. Stalin in the inevitability of war with Germany in the very near future and to prove the need to implement the urgent measures provided for by the operational mobilization plan.

Of course, these measures would not guarantee complete success in repelling the enemy onslaught, since the forces of the parties were far from equal. But our troops could enter the battle in a more organized manner and, consequently, inflict much greater losses on the enemy. This is confirmed by the successful defensive actions of units and formations in the areas of Vladimir-Volynsky, Rava-Russkaya, Przemyśl and in sectors of the Southern Front .

All this is understandable. But on June 22, nothing catastrophic happened in the Southwestern Front. How much time does it take for units of the active army to enter the battle in a more organized manner? Day? Two? A week? After all, a unique situation has been created on both southern fronts. Our main forces were concentrated here, while the enemy's main forces turned out to be in another direction. Here the position of the German troops was the most precarious. The Germans had to give almost 400 kilometers of front to their Romanian and Hungarian would-be allies. Why, with such a correlation of forces of the Red Army, was success in repulsing the enemy onslaught not guaranteed?

The roots of the catastrophe on the Southwestern Front should be sought primarily in those fatal decisions that were worked out by the Soviet command. Yes, the headquarters of Kirponos could not ignore the instructions descending from above. Yes, the representative of the Headquarters G.K. was sent to monitor the proper implementation of directives No. 2 and No. 3. Zhukov: "At about 1 pm on June 22, I.V. called me. Stalin said: "Our front commanders do not

have sufficient experience in directing the combat operations of the troops and, apparently, are somewhat confused. The Politburo has decided to send you to the Southwestern Front as a representative of the Headquarters of the High Command. We will send Marshal Shaposhnikov and Marshal Kulik to the Western Front. You need to fly immediately to Kyiv and from there, together with Khrushchev, go to the front headquarters in Ternopil.

By the end of the day I was in Kyiv at the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus. U, where N.S. was waiting for me. Khrushchev. He said it was dangerous to fly further. German pilots are chasing transport aircraft. You have to go by car"[51]

But while Zhukov and Khrushchev got from Kyiv to Ternopil along front-line clogged roads, M.P. Kirponos and his most experienced chief of staff, Lieutenant General M.A. Purkaev could quite independently organize a proper rebuff to the aggressor. At the same time, no impromptu decisions were required, for which the army and command would not be ready. Orders in such cases are given standard. Since the enemy managed to disable the connection, it had to be restored. AM Vasilevsky complained in his memoirs: "From the very beginning of the war, the General Staff experienced difficulties due to the constant loss of communication channels with the fronts and armies. It was also difficult for the troops without communication with the Headquarters, the General Staff "[52] . However, judging by the memoirs of G.K. Zhukov, communication with the commanders of the armies at the headquarters of the Southwestern Front was and operated without interference. Having established communication, it was necessary to organize the interaction of the troops of the front. Get information about the

enemy. Find out the position of your own forces. On the 22nd and even on the 23rd of June this situation did not arouse any special fears. At the disposal of M.P. Kirponos had ten mobile artillery and anti-tank brigades. German tank-mechanized units were just beginning to seep into the gaps made at the junctions between the fortified areas. Their width did not exceed 15–20 kilometers. It remained only to deploy and put up defenses on the paths of the probable advance of German tanks, at least two anti-tank artillery brigades with one or two rifle divisions attached to them. In addition, it would be expedient to set up tank ambushes in such threatening directions, consisting of powerful KB and T-34s. Indeed, in the future, our tankers successfully used the tactics of tank ambushes many times. And even if it took a whole day to implement all these measures, their effectiveness would still justify itself. It is clear that the representative of the Stavka G.K. Zhukov arrived from Moscow with orders to launch a counteroffensive. But the order of the front headquarters to block the gaps made by the Germans was in the prevailing

the setting is completely natural and could hardly arouse objections. Therefore, it would not have been necessary to concentrate in such a hurry to strike the mechanized corps. For some time, even for a day or two, the Germans would have run into our anti-tank defenses. But the main motto of the summer of 1941 was - to win time! For the Germans, there were no other ways. They had little choice: to strike at the joints or to conduct frontal assaults on fortified areas. The examples of the 99th and 41st rifle divisions clearly showed that the choice in favor of the second option would be suicidal. In the memoirs of G.K. Zhukov emphasizes that the idea of a counter-offensive "caused sharp objections from the chief of staff of the front, M.A. Purkaeva". Therefore, not all military leaders were captivated by hat-throwing moods. But Directive No. 3 contained an exhaustive order: forward and only

forward! Nevertheless, it is very difficult to understand why it was necessary to throw all six mechanized corps into this offensive. Why not two, not three, not four, but all at once? Firstly, according to the ABC of military affairs, you cannot throw everything you have at the enemy at once. Part of our forces must be reserved in case of unforeseen circumstances inevitable in war. After all, that's what the term "reserve" is for. Secondly, there was simply no tactical, operational or strategic need to throw such a force as six mechanized corps against the Kleist tank group. Let us recall the cited G.K. Zhukov in his memoirs, a telegraph conversation with the commander of the 5th Army, M.I. Potapov. Potapov reports that about two thousand enemy tanks are operating in the zone of his army. Zhukov in the note gives "Information clarification: exaggerated"[53] . Right. Although the Soviet command might not have exact information about the number of tanks in the Kleist tank group, they were approximately accurate. There are no more than a thousand of them. Consequently, three mechanized corps would have been enough for an offensive. And the other three had to be left in reserve. The decision to throw all available tank forces into battle against Kleist was an unforgivable mistake of the Soviet command.

O tanks turned out to be strongly

However, the death of six mechanized corps still did not mean the final defeat of the troops of the Southwestern Front. Of course, their situation worsened significantly. But not enough to allow

the enemy to make breakthroughs to Zhitomir and Shepetovka. Tank battles in the Lutsk-Dubno-Brody region continued for a whole week. And seven days in a mobile war is a long time. Moreover, on the left flank of the front, the Germans still could not take the planned pace. On the seventh day of hostilities, they were just approaching Lvov, step by step overcoming the stubborn resistance of the troops of the 6th Army. Considering the terrible defeat inflicted by the Germans on the fronts of Pavlov and Kuznetsov, the situation on the Southwestern Front looked quite tolerable. The difficult position of Army

Group South was noted by German generals. Kurt Tippelskirch wrote: "The 17th Army, after initial successes at the border west of the Lvov line - Rava Russian, met a strong enemy defending in well-fortified positions. The 6th Army advanced across the Styr River. But there she, like the 1st Panzer Group, was subjected first in the south and then in the north to intense Russian counterattacks, in which fresh tank forces were brought up. Until July 3, stubborn battles continued on the entire front. The Russians withdrew to the east very slowly and often only after fierce counterattacks against the German tank units that had pulled ahead. A similar assessment was given by the Chief of the German General Staff, Franz Halder: "Army Group South is—

slowly advancing, unfortunately, suffering significant losses. On the side of the enemy acting against Army Group South, there is a firm and energetic leadership. The enemy is constantly bringing up new fresh forces from the depths against our tank wedge. Reserves are being pulled up both in front of the central sector of the front and against the southern flank of the army group .

Thus, the Soviet command had enough time not only to level the front line, which their commanders could not afford on the North-Western and Western fronts, but also to organize in advance a solid defense in the belt of fortified areas along the old border line. These URs were by no means in a hopeless state for defense, as a number of historians often try to present. On April 8, 1941, the General Staff of the Red Army sent the commanders of the Western and

Kyiv Special Military Districts directives of the following content:

“Until special instructions, the Slutsk, Sebezh, Shepetovsky, Izyaslavsky, Starokonstantinovsky, Ostropolsky fortified areas should be kept in a state of conservation.

To use these fortified areas in wartime, prepare and carry out the following activities:

- create personnel for the departments of fortified areas ...
- to complete the system of artillery and machine-gun fire in each defense node and stronghold, create sites for wood-earth and rubble-concrete structures that will need to be built in the first ten days from the start of the war by field troops ... - based on projects and technical instructions of the Defense Construction Department of the Red Army to calculate the need for weapons and the simplest internal equipment ... - in the calculation of forces, means and work plans, take into account reinforced concrete structures built in 1938-1939. in Letichevsky, Mogilev, Yampolsky, Novograd-Volynsky, Minsk, Polotsk and Mozyr fortified areas ...

To the head of the Defense Construction Department to develop and k. 1.5. 41 to send technical instructions to the districts on the installation of weapons and the simplest internal equipment in the buildings of 1938-1939 . "[56] . —

In general, the Russian soldier has long been famous for his ability to first quickly build a defensive line, and then steadfastly hold on to it. So it was in Sevastopol during the Crimean War or in Port Arthur. The commander of the Southwestern Front could do the same. In this case, a powerful defense would have been created in the way of German tanks. The configuration of the SDs on the old border was calculated in such a way that it was impossible to bypass them. The Germans would have had to storm our fortified lines. There were enough forces to hold them. If not for all the mechanized corps

squandered in counterattacks, then the situation for the Germans would become very bad. Because a tank put on the defensive, dug into the ground, is a real mobile pillbox, which, if necessary, does not need to be blown up during withdrawal, but simply moved to a new line. In the meantime, the enemy would be engaged in frontal assaults that were unprofitable for him, in the rear, our sappers and the mobilized population would create another line of defense. And one more, and another, and so on until the very Kyiv UR. I wonder how long the Germans would have had enough gunpowder to pierce the deeply echeloned Russian

defenses with their foreheads? It cannot be said that M.P. Kirponos or the generals at Headquarters were so slow-witted that they could not bear such a plan. But for the umpteenth time, the corresponding order was given belatedly. And procrastination in war, like nowhere else in any other sphere of human activity, is like death. The untimely issuance of the order to bring the URs on the old border into a combat state and to consolidate the main forces of the front in them led to a rapid breakthrough of German tanks towards Kyiv. But with a different development of the situation, this breakthrough could not have happened at all. The Germans would be forced to trample in front of our defensive lines, lose people and equipment, not being able to make up for their losses due to the extremely limited reserves. Even if they had reached the Kyiv UR, by that time they would have bled to death and the Red Army would only have to deliver a devastating blow to its weakened, exhausted enemy.

As a general conclusion to what has been said about border battles on all fronts, I would like to note the following. All justifying references to the sudden, treacherous attack of fascist Germany, to put it mildly, are untenable. N.G. Kuznetsov categorically refutes them: "It so happened that, speaking of the initial period of the war, they usually emphasize the surprise attack on us by Nazi Germany and the advantages that the enemy received due to this. But to explain our failures only by this reason does not suit us, military people.

We have no right to be taken by surprise. Back at school, we were taught that wars now begin without

"Coming at you" warnings. Any aggression is prepared secretly, and this must not be forgotten.

Surprise is usually divided into strategic, operational and tactical. The strategic surprise of the attack on June 22, 1941 is out of the question. For the habits of the German command were well known to us. German generals have long considered not only the surprise of an attack, but also the strength of the first blows, to be an indispensable condition for success. They have long relied on blitzkrieg ... A series of such operations took place before our eyes in the pre-war years. Moreover, the Germans openly concentrated their divisions on our borders. This means that the clouds have been gathering over us for a long time, and the lightning was ready [57] to strike at any moment.

S.M. Shtemenko: "The statement is as bold as it is ignorant. After all, the concept of "the initial period of the war" is an operational-strategic category that has never had any significant impact on the training of a soldier, company, regiment, or even division. And a soldier, and a company, and a regiment, and a division act in general the same way in any period of the war. They must attack resolutely, defend stubbornly and skillfully maneuver in all cases, regardless of whether the battle is fought: at the beginning of the war or at the end of it. There were never any distinctions in the statutes on this matter. They don't exist now . "[58]

Truly golden words! And their essence is simple: "Dear comrades, stop inventing excuses. It's better to be honest about your mistakes." This is the point of view of a real soldier.

Chapter

4 The Greatest Tank Battle

Every Soviet person, from the school bench, memorized the date July 12, 1943. On this day, according to official Soviet historiography, the greatest tank battle of the Second World War took place in the Prokhorovka area. On both sides, about one and a half thousand tanks took part in it. The ridge of the fascist tank troops was broken. The final collapse was suffered by the myth that Hitler's propaganda had blossomed that "summer is the time for the victories of the German

army." However, when reading the memoirs of G.K. Zhukov regarding the events near Prokhorovka there are some ambiguities. Describing the fighting on the Southwestern Front in June 1941, Marshal Zhukov makes a serious remark to Soviet historians: "Our historical literature somehow casually touches on this greatest frontier battle in the initial period of the war with Nazi Germany. It would be necessary to analyze in detail the operational expediency of using here a counterattack by mechanized corps against the enemy's main grouping that had broken through, and the organization of the counterattack itself. Indeed, as a result of precisely these actions of our troops in Ukraine, the enemy's plan for a swift breakthrough to Kyiv was thwarted at the very beginning. The enemy suffered heavy losses and became convinced of the resilience of the Soviet soldiers, who were ready to fight to the last drop of blood. By the way, G.K. Zhukov, in his rather voluminous memoirs, numbering 730 pages, devotes only three pages to this greatest frontier battle. Why, in order to set an

example for negligent historians, did he not analyze in detail such a large-scale issue? The problem is that the leading and guiding line in the history of the war is clearly defined: the greatest battle took place near Prokhorovka. Therefore, no detailed analysis of the greatest battle that G.K. Zhukov, did not follow. And so everything is clear. It was not until fifty years later that a true

Dubno area. It suddenly became clear that it was there, and not near Prokhorovka, that the greatest tank battle really took place. True, its result for the Soviet side was very doubtful.

In the previous chapter, a counterattack by six mechanized corps of the Southwestern Front was briefly mentioned. This brevity was dictated precisely by the considerations that G.K. Zhukov: the greatest battle is worthy of a separate and more detailed description. But first, let's look at the circumstances that preceded it. So, on June 23, 1941, as a result of the Kleist 1st Panzer

Group wedging into the junction between the Vladimir-Volynsky and Strumilovsky fortified areas, a large gap was made in the Soviet front line. The gap in the zone of the 5th and 6th armies could not only be used by the enemy to reach their rear. Its main danger was that it could become a convenient springboard for a swift German attack on Kyiv.

The command of the Southwestern Front, well aware of the impending threat, took appropriate urgent measures. These measures were clearly formulated in Directive No. 3: the troops should go over to the counteroffensive with all their might and transfer combat operations to enemy territory. Moreover, the correlation of forces promised a quick and decisive success. Therefore, neither the representative of the Headquarters of the High Command, nor the front commander doubted that they would win a grandiose victory over the presumptuous aggressor.

"The situation that has arisen," recalled G.K. Zhukov, - was discussed in detail at the Military Council of the front. I suggested M.P. Kirponos should immediately give a preliminary order to concentrate mechanized corps to launch a counterattack on the main grouping of Army Group South, which had broken through in the Sokal area. Engage the entire aviation of the front and part of the long-range bomber aviation of the High Command to the counterattack. The command and headquarters of the front, having quickly prepared preliminary combat orders, handed them over to the armies and corps. Only the chief of staff of the front, Lieutenant General M.A. Purkaev, as they said then, "succumbed to alarmist

sentiments", suggesting that instead of an offensive, put the main forces of the front on the defensive. But the majority on the Military Council rejected his proposal.

Indeed, what reason did Purkaev have for panic? The 1st Panzer Group Kleist had a total of 700 combat vehicles. And at the disposal of the command of the Southwestern Front were six mechanized corps, which included about 4,000 tanks. True, with such an overwhelming superiority, which was a huge plus, there was also a minus - the dispersion of units and subunits of mechanized corps at a very significant distance from each other. Therefore, before being thrown into battle, they should have been assembled into shock groups. The general deployment of the troops of the Southwestern Front assigned to the

offensive looked as follows. The 4th mechanized corps, commanded by Major General AA Vlasov, was located on the left flank of the front, in the Lvov region, operating in the 6th Army zone. From its composition, the command intended to single out the core - the 8th Panzer Division. The rest of the corps had to continue fighting in the previously occupied areas. 15th Mechanized Corps Major General I.I. Karpezo was located in the Brody area and part of his

forces had already been drawn into the fighting. 22nd Mechanized Corps under the command of Major General S.M. Kondrusev was concentrated in the Lutsk region. But the remaining three had to make marches of 200-300 kilometers to the front line in order to be able to take part in the upcoming battles. 8th Mechanized Corps Lieutenant General D.I. Ryabyshev began to advance from Drogobych, which is 300 kilometers from the designated point of concentration. About 150 kilometers had to pass the 9th mechanized corps under the command of Major General K.K. Rokossovsky. But the worst of all was the 19th mechanized corps, commanded by Major General N.V. Feklenko. His corps was located 400 kilometers from the front line, in the Vinnitsa region. In addition, the 27th, 31st and 36th rifle corps were to participate in the offensive. They also needed time to reach their original areas. The original plan of the offensive operation came from a generally correct decision to gather all forces into a fist. According to the plan developed by the command of the Southwestern Front, the 4th, 8th

and the 15th mechanized corps with attached rifle units were to strike at the right flank of the German tank-mechanized group from the Brody area to Radekhov and Sokal, and also to assist the encircled 124th rifle division. The 9th, 19th and 22nd mechanized corps, the 36th and 27th rifle corps and the 1st anti-tank brigade attacked the German left flank from the Lutsk-Rovno region to Vladimir-Volynsky, among other things, having the task of rescuing 87 th Infantry Division. But the harsh reality forced me to literally correct the plan that seemed carefully calibrated on the go. That's how G.K. Zhukov described the situation in Ryabyshev's corps: "At 9 am on June 23, we arrived at the command post of the commander of the 8th

mechanized corps, Lieutenant General D.I. Ryabyshev. From the appearance of the commander and the headquarters commanders, it was not difficult to guess that they had made a difficult path. They very quickly passed from the Drohobych region to the Brody region ... D.I. Ryabyshev showed on the map where and how the corps was located. He briefly reported in what

the state of his part.

- The corps needs a day to fully concentrate, put in order the materiel and replenish supplies, - he said, - during the same day, combat reconnaissance will be carried out and the management of the corps will be organized. Consequently, the corps can enter the battle with all its might on the morning of June 24th. "Good," I replied. - Of course, it would

be better to launch a counterattack jointly with the 9th, 19th and 22nd mechanized corps, but, unfortunately, they go to their starting areas late. The situation will not allow us to wait for the full concentration of the corps. The enemy can oppose a counterattack by the 8th Mechanized Corps with a strong tank and anti-tank artillery barrier. Considering this circumstance, it is necessary to carefully reconnoiter the terrain and the enemy . D.I. himself assessed the situation in his building somewhat differently. Ryabyshev: "The remaining materiel after such high-speed marches turned out to—

be technically unprepared for combat. The absence of a regulatory service on the part of the front and the army on the most important operational highways led to the disorderly movement of troops, the creation of "traffic jams", a huge

the number of accidents and accidents, as well as the useless waste of time on the movement of troops, which led as a result to untimely execution of orders "[62] . So G.K. Zhukov, as they say, "a mistake came out." At 9 o'clock in the morning of June, he could not arrive at the command post of commander Ryabyshev, since at that time the 8th mechanized corps was on the march somewhere south of Lvov. Accordingly, there was no question of any entry into battle on June 24.

Approximately the same thing happened in other corps advancing to the front line. Forced marches, not provided for by any statutory regulations, led to excessively high non-combat losses of materiel from breakdowns and accidents, stretching and lagging behind units, and therefore to the initial loss of full-fledged control of the mechanized corps by their commanders. Not to mention the higher headquarters. Therefore, the attacking troops could not be assembled into a single, powerful grouping. In the current

situation, the command of the South-Western Front made a different decision. Word G.K. Zhukov: "Chief of Staff of the Front, Lieutenant General M.A. Purkaev and the front commander, Colonel General M.P. Kirponos reported:

"Fights are going on in all sectors of the front. The main extremely fierce battle is played out in the region of Brody - Dubno - Vladimir-Volynsky. On June 25, the 9th and 19th mechanized corps enter the forests in the Rovno region. We decided, - said the front commander, - on June 24, without waiting for the full concentration of the corps, to launch a counterattack on Klevan and Dubno. The commander of the 5th Army, except for the 22nd Mechanized Corps, must combine the actions of the 9th and 19th Mechanized Corps and provide them with the necessary

The decision was reasonable, and I agreed with the front command, proposing to check the interaction between the corps and the front aviation [63] . However, a strange position was taken by a representative of the Headquarters of the High Command on the Southwestern Front. First, Ryabyshev, then Kirponos and Purkaev offered him deliberately wrong solutions, but he agreed with everything, however, after making motivated remarks. Which, by the way, did not materialize.

On the morning of June 24, the 15th mechanized corps of General I.I. went on the offensive. Karpezo. Since it was not possible to concentrate all the units subordinate to him in time, Karpezo carried out the task assigned to the corps to capture Radekhov by the forces of the 10th Panzer Division, Major General S.Ya. Ogurtsova. The rest only pulled up to the battle area. In addition, Ogurtsov's division did not operate at full strength. Her battalion of heavy tanks, armed with KB, was hopelessly behind on the march. The situation was aggravated by the lack of accurate data about the enemy. Former battalion commander Z.S. Slyusarenko wrote in his memoirs how his battalion was sent to Brody instead of Radekhov: "We had to go about 60 kilometers. The average speed of KB is 20–25 kilometers per hour. The road is sandy, the day is hot... In such conditions, at least every hour of engine operation, it is necessary to wash the oil filters... Of course, we fulfilled the order, but at what cost! More than half of the cars got stuck on the way due to technical malfunctions. The reconnaissance sent by me forward returned with a message that no enemy was found in Brody and its environs. Before we had time, as they say, to take a breath, we received a new order - to immediately return back to the former defense area, to go on a forced march. Three hours were allotted for preparation. Thus, the command of the 48th German motorized corps operating in this area had the opportunity to provide well-

organized resistance to the parts of the Karpezo corps introduced into battle one by one. During the day of June 24, units of the 10th Soviet Panzer Division fought in the Radekhov area in a meeting battle with the enemy's 16th Panzer Division. Ogurtsov's tankers fought selflessly, but suffered irreparable losses and were forced to withdraw from the battle. The remaining parts of the corps entered the battle as they arrived at their original positions on June 25, 26 and 27. Then the 8th Panzer Division of the 4th Mechanized Corps came to their aid from the Lvov area. The German command, noticing the advance of large enemy forces to its right flank, abandoned the tactics of oncoming battles and set about organizing a solid anti-tank defense. Therefore, the attacking Soviet tank units managed to penetrate the German defensive formations onl

the resistance of the German troops concentrated on the defensive line. The main

trouble was that the Soviet offensive did not come as a surprise to the Germans. They foresaw such a development of events and prepared for them. General Halder left an entry in his diary on this matter: "The enemy is constantly pulling up new fresh forces from the depths against our tank wedge ... The enemy, as expected, with significant tank forces, went on the offensive on the southern flank of the 1st Panzer Group. Progress was noted in some areas"[65] . So all the attacks of the units of the 4th and 15th mechanized corps only led to huge losses in manpower and equipment. The result of their actions was briefly summed up by G.K. Zhukov: "The 15th mechanized corps of General I. I. Karpezo fulfilled its task, unfortunately, not to the full extent of its significant time of opportunity"[66] . —

The fighting of the 22nd mechanized corps on the left flank of the enemy tank wedge northwest of Lutsk took place in a similar way. By the beginning of the attack, General Kondrusev failed to gather all his troops. The 41st Panzer Division of the corps was separated from the main forces in the Maciejów area - st. Koshary and did not take part in the offensive at all. As noted above, the Germans calculated the intentions of the Soviet command and prepared proper anti-tank defenses in the way of the attacking parts of the Kondrusev corps. As soon as all the available forces of the 22nd mechanized corps were drawn into a protracted battle, the German 14th Panzer Division undertook a detour maneuver and brought down the enemy's left flank. The Soviet troops, having suffered significant losses, retreated across the Styr River. G.K. Zhukov expressed his assessment of the actions of these units in just a few words: "In the battles, the 22nd mechanized corps under the command of Major General S.M. Kondrusev and the 27th Rifle Corps of the 5th Army"[67] . We add that of all the units of the 27th Corps, only the 135th Infantry Division provided support for the tanks. The 1st anti-tank artillery brigade did not participate in the offensive in the Vladimir-Volyn direction and after that it was very useful for organizing

the defense. While fierce fighting was going on along the flanks of the 1st Panzer Group, Kleist continued to develop a breakthrough in the operat

On June 25, German tanks broke into Dubno, covering about 150 kilometers in three days. The development of the German offensive forced General Colonel M.P. Kirponos to flog a fever and throw on the enemy's flanks all the fresh forces newly arrived in the battle area.

On the morning of June 26, the 9th mechanized corps from the Klevan-Olyka region launched a counterattack in the direction of Dubno. He was opposed by the same 13th and 14th German tank divisions, which had repulsed the advance of the 22nd mechanized corps the day before. Their mode of action has not changed. Standing on a tough defense, the Germans were able to hold back the attacks of the 9th mechanized corps. Its commander K.K. Rokossovsky noted in his memoirs: "I got the impression that the front commander and his headquarters in this case simply repeated the directive of the General Staff, which might not have known the specific situation. I think that in this case it would be more correct to take responsibility and set the troops a task, based on the situation that had developed by the time the directive of the General Staff was received. Simply put, Rokossovsky's opinion coincided with the opinion of Purkaev: it

was not necessary to climb on the German defense, but to stand on the defensive ourselves. All subsequent days in the zone of the 9th mechanized corps there were protracted, positional battles. There has been little progress. Only the 20th Panzer Division, Colonel M.E. Katukov had a notable success. In his memoirs, he wrote: "The first victory near Klevan cost us dearly ... In this unequal battle, we lost all our "batushki"[69]. The enemy's 13th Panzer Division, which fought against Katukov's tankers, also suffered heavy losses.

But this individual success could not change the situation as a whole. Rokossovsky's neighbor on the left was the 19th mechanized corps of Major General N.V. Feklenko. His offensive was to be supported by the 36th Rifle Corps of Major General P.V. Sysoev. Since Feklenko's corps had to make a march of almost 400 kilometers before arriving at the front, the same story was repeated with its concentration. On the morning of June 26, only the 43rd Panzer Division of Colonel I.G. managed to reach its initial positions in the Rovno region. Qibina. The approach of other parts could be expected not earlier than in a day, or even two. But, of course, there was no time.

Nevertheless, the tankmen of the 19th mechanized corps had to spend several hours putting the materiel in order and resting after a hard march. In the afternoon, a part of the 40th Panzer Division of Colonel M.V. approached Shirobokov. The offensive began at about 1800 and had initial success. Soviet tanks approached almost the outskirts of Dubno, pushing the 11th Panzer Division of the enemy.

However, the Germans destroyed the crossings over the Ikva River in time. Therefore, a rapid breakthrough on the shoulders of the retreating enemy failed. Since neither the 9th nor the 22nd mechanized corps could succeed, the Soviet command was afraid of exposing the right flank of Feklenko's corps, which had jumped far ahead, and gave the order to withdraw to their original positions. On June 26, a new

blow hit the German right flank, where the 4th and 15th mechanized corps had already been defeated. The 8th mechanized corps went on the offensive from the Brody area. Task for General D.I. Ryabyshev was put more reasonably. Since a deep German breakthrough appeared in the center, Ryabyshev's corps aimed not at Radekhov and Sokal, where the Germans were ready to meet his blow with pleasure, but at Berestechko, with access to the rear of the enemy's moving units that had broken through to Dubno.

But, like Feklenko's corps, the 8th mechanized corps had to engage in battle on the move, after a grueling 300-kilometer march. General Ryabyshev was not given time either to gather all his forces or to organize proper reconnaissance. Even before entering the battle, the corps suffered unexpectedly high non-combat losses from breakdowns and accidents. Unlike their unlucky predecessors from the 4th and 15th mechanized corps, Ryabyshev's corps had an undoubted initial success. In the first hours of the battle, the German 57th Infantry Division, which held the right flank of the 48th motorized corps in this sector, was defeated. Overcoming the fierce resistance of the enemy, Ryabyshev's tanks advanced 20 kilometers by the end of the day. In fact, the combat mission assigned to the 8th mechanized corps was

completed.

Perfectly aware of the danger, the German command took hasty measures to localize the Russian breakthrough. First of all, Kleist resorted to the tried and tested method of delivering continuous and massive air strikes on tanks.

enemy. The 44th army corps, the 16th motorized division, anti-tank artillery battalions and batteries of 88-mm anti-aircraft guns were transferred to the Berestechko area in a fire order. In addition, Kleist deliberately took a risk by ordering a part of the forces from Radekhov, where the attacks of the 4th and 15th mechanized corps continued that day, to fight the Ryabyshev corps. G.K. Zhukov especially noted the excellent military operations of this

formation: "On June 26, the 8th mechanized corps of D.I. went on the offensive. Ryabyshev in the direction of Berestechko. We had high hopes for this corps. He was better equipped than others with the latest tank technology and quite well trained. The successful actions of the 8th mechanized corps were very soon felt by the German troops. This was especially true after the defeat of the 57th Infantry Division, which covered the right flank of the 48th motorized corps of the Kleist group.

A rather difficult situation arose for the 48th motorized corps of the Germans that day, and the Nazis were forced to throw all their aircraft against our counterattack, which only saved them from defeat [I wonder where our aircraft was at that time?]. The enemy had to bring up the 44th Army Corps and other troops against the Soviet units"[70] .

Thus, by the end of June 26, the Germans managed to stop the further advance of Ryabyshev's corps. The unsuccessful attacks of the mechanized corps everywhere forced the Military Council of the front to finally listen to the arguments of M.A. Purkaeva. The command of the Southwestern Front was inclined to decide to stop useless counterattacks, create a solid defense with the forces of the 27th, 31st and 36th rifle corps, and withdraw the mechanized corps to the rear and prepare for the subsequent counteroffensive. But since there were no instructions from Moscow to cancel Directive No. 3, the representative of the Headquarters, who was at the front headquarters, continued to demand it.

execution.

G.K. himself Zhukov motivated his demands in this way: "In connection with the advance of the enemy's advanced units in the Dubno area, General D.I. Ryabyshev received an order to turn his 8th corps there. The 15th mechanized corps aimed the main forces in general

direction to Berestechko and then also to Dubno. The approaching 36th rifle and 19th mechanized corps were also sent to the Dubno region. A fierce battle in the Dubno region began on June 27"[71] . So, Ryabyshev's corps,—

scattered on a wide front near Berestechko, had to withdraw from the battle in a matter of hours without rest and sleep, gather and advance 50 kilometers north to new starting positions. In its place was to be Carpezo's corps, pretty battered in previous battles near Radekhov. Moreover, he had to attack a well-organized enemy defense. Although this did not mean at all that the 8th mechanized corps was in for an easier task. The German command had no doubt that the Russian attacks on Dubno would continue, and took care of organizing an appropriate meeting. In addition, the right-flank corps of Kondrusev, Rokossovsky and Feklenko had to repeat all their counterattacks on a new one.

It is obvious that the 8th mechanized corps could not arrive in the designated area by the 9 o'clock in the morning of June 27, appointed by the front headquarters. But since the order had to be carried out, it was necessary on the basis of the units at hand - the 34th Panzer Division of Colonel I.V. Vasiliev, one tank and one motorcycle regiment to form a mobile group under the command of brigade commissar N.K. Popelya and throw her on the offensive. It is curious how G.K. Zhukov: "Moreover, the actions of the 8th mechanized corps could have had a greater effect if the commander had not divided the corps into two groups and, in addition, had not entrusted the command of one of the groups to General N.K. Popel, who did not have sufficient operational-tactical training to lead a big battle "[72] . Like this! Moreover, Popel himself, in his memoirs,—says that he was against the "suicidal" decision to introduce the mechanized corps into battle in parts, and he was appointed to command the mobile group by a member of the Front's Military Council, corps commissar HH Vashugin. One way or another, but the porridge that had

been previously disentangled near Dubno was brewed again. Starting on June 27, fierce fighting continued on the 28th, 29th and 30th. The Germans had to additionally transfer the 55th Army Corps to the battle area.

The increased pressure on the flanks forced them to stop their tank wedge, the tip of which reached Ostrog, 60 kilometers east of Dubno. The Germans were saved only by the complete lack of interaction between the attacking Soviet units. Therefore, holding back one of the mechanized corps with positional battles, they threw their moving parts at the other. This was also noted by G.K. Zhukov: "If ground and air reconnaissance had been better organized in the troops of the Southwestern Front, interaction and command and control of troops had been more developed, the result of the counterattack would have been even more significant"[73]. In the meantime, all this was better organized and

worked out by the Germans. As a result, on June 29, part of the 8th mechanized corps, which was under the command of Ryabyshev, was surrounded. On June 30, the Germans closed the ring around Popel's mobile group. Since the representative of the Headquarters had left for Moscow three days earlier, the command of the Southwestern Front decided to withdraw the remaining mechanized corps from the battle as soon as possible. Thus, on July 1, this greatest tank battle of the Second World

War ended. What were its results? Word G.K. Zhukov: "Our troops failed to completely defeat the enemy and stop his offensive, but the main thing was done: the enemy strike force, rushing to the capital of Ukraine, was detained in the Brody-Dubno region and exhausted"[74]. True, on page 274, Georgy Konstantinovich, describing the general situation on the fronts on July 2, noted in particular: "The situation of the Southwestern Front has deteriorated to a large extent, since at the same time the German troops, after several attempts, nevertheless broke the defense in the Rovno region - Dubno - Kremenets and rushed into the resulting breakthrough. Further, we are talking about how German tanks traveled 100 kilometers to Novograd-Volynsky U Ra in two days, how Berdichev and Zhitomir were taken, as a result of which the threat of encirclement of the 12th, 26th and 6th armies of the Southwestern Front

But in the memoirs of G.K. Zhukov does not mention one very important event. The day after the end of the battle near Dubno, Commissar HH Vashugin, a member of the Military Council, shot himself. Why did he do this, if the enemy strike force, which was rushing to the capital of Ukraine, was detained and exhausted?

Chances of winning

Let us recall once again the balance of forces of the opposing sides. It was in favor of the Soviet troops approximately 5:1. In order to somehow smooth this gap, in the memoirs of our generals and marshals, a version was invariably cited that created the opposite impression. For example, I.Kh. Bagramyan wrote: "Unfortunately, we could oppose only 133 T-34 and KV tanks to the 600-700 modern tanks of the four tank divisions of General Kleist. The rest of the fleet of the 22nd and 15th mechanized corps consisted, as I have already said, of old, worn out, light combat training vehicles of the T-26 and BT types" [75]

At the same time, there was no escape from the scale of the event. The official Soviet history read: "As a result of the grandiose tank battle that took place in the regions of Lutsk, Rovno, Dubno, Brody from June 25 to July 2, the 1st Panzer Group and the 6th Army, advancing on the main direction of Army Group South ", suffered significant losses and their offensive was stopped for eight days. Despite the fact that the Soviet mobile formations failed to completely defeat the enemy strike force, their counterattack was of great importance. The enemy troops not only suffered heavy losses, but also failed, as planned, to encircle the Soviet troops in the Lvov ledge. This counterattack had a decisive influence on the subsequent battles that unfolded in the Zhytomyr-Kiev direction . A solidarity opinion was expressed by G.K. Zhukov: "So the —

troops of the Southwestern Front successfully delivered one of the first counterattacks against the enemy. Its strength could be even greater if the front command had more powerful aircraft to interact with mechanized corps and at least 1-2 more rifle corps"[77] . But Marshal P.A. spoils all the favorable impression. Rotmistrov: "The mechanized corps of the

South-Western Front entered this battle after 200-400 km marches in the conditions of enemy air supremacy. The introduction of these corps into battle was carried out without proper organization of the offensive, without reconnaissance of the enemy and the terrain. There was no air and proper artillery support. Therefore, the enemy had

the ability to repel the attacks of our troops one by one, maneuvering part of their forces, and at the same time continue the offensive on open directions"[78] . In general, with such a formulation of the matter, neither more powerful aviation, nor at least two more rifle corps, nor three, nor five, would significantly change the course of the battle.

The Germans really failed to encircle the Soviet troops in the Lvov salient. But they could not surround them, since our main forces were there. Moreover, there was no one to provide deep coverage of the flanks of the troops of the Southwestern Front. Its junctions with the Western and Southern fronts were not crushed by the enemy's mobile groupings. The direction of the main attacks of Army Group "South" inevitably led to a head-on collision with the armies of Potapov, Muzychenko and Kostenko. So it was in reality. Therefore, the events in the Dubno region had a very distant relation to the German plans to encircle the Soviet troops. As for stopping the enemy offensive for eight days, General Goth remarked on this occasion: "The South group had the hardest time of all. The enemy troops, defending in front of the formations of the northern wing, were thrown back from the border, but they quickly recovered from the unexpected blow and counterattacks of their reserves and tank units located in the depths stopped the advance of the German troops. The operational breakthrough of the 1st Panzer Group, attached to the 6th Army, [was not achieved until June 28 "\[79\]](#) . This breakthrough was achieved after 28 June. Just 72 hours later, the Germans ~~hacked~~ the Southwestern Front all the way. The real task of the Dubna battle was to defeat the German shock groups. She went

far beyond the usual counterattacks. Four thousand tanks are too much for a counterattack. But just right when trying to seize the initiative from the enemy and turn the tide of hostilities in their favor.

There is no doubt that the chances of winning were absolutely real. Even without more powerful aircraft. No additional rifle corps. There were more than enough available forces. It was only necessary not to dispose of them in a fire rush. Fortunately, nothing particularly threatening happened on the Southwestern Front in the first two days of the war. So, there was some time left.

First of all, one fundamental point. After all, from the very beginning it was clear to both the front command and the representatives of the Stavka that a one-time concentration of mechanized corps was impossible. Yes, the situation did not allow waiting. To wait meant to untie the hands of the enemy. But it did not follow from this that it was necessary to hastily throw into battle what we ourselves had at hand at the moment. It could have

been a different decision. G.K. Zhukov mentioned in his memoirs that the chief of staff of the front, M.A. Purkaev sharply objected to directives issued from Moscow. But he could not help but know that Zhukov was not one of those people to whom one could object sharply. Purkaev's motives are understandable: being an experienced and competent general staff officer, he must have been biting his elbows from annoyance at the fact that he was being deprived of the opportunity to win a sure victory. The meaning of his proposals was quite simple. While the mechanized corps will be pulled up to their starting positions, delay the movement of the German tank wedge by organizing a strong anti-tank defense. After all, it was for these purposes that mobile artillery brigades were created even before the war. It was possible to deploy them in the directions of movement of enemy tanks within a few hours. And while the Germans would be engaged in breaking

through our defenses, gather all the mechanized corps into one fist. The ideal scenario was the preparation of several defensive anti-tank lines. And the mechanized corps should have been held back. Let the Germans find themselves in a situation where they need to break through the defenses prepared in their way over and over again. A natural barrier for the enemy are five large rivers - Turya, Stokhod, Styr, Goryn, Sluch, not to mention the many small ones. The terrain is mostly problematic in terms of tank penetration. In itself, it is an obstacle, in addition to our wonderful 76 and 45 mm anti-tank guns. It remains only to wait for the enemy to stop at one of the lines, no matter which - the second, third or fifth. The main thing is to force him to waste his strength in positional battles, to run out of steam, to exhaust his reserves, which are not abundant. And when it becomes clear that the Germans have given all their best, fall upon them with the combined power of six mechanized corps. And drive, drive, drive! hang from them for

shoulders. Do not let them take a breath, get hooked somewhere, put the battered troops in order and organize the defense. The

consequences of such a development of events could be simply catastrophic. After all, from the very first days, the troops of the Army Group Center went far ahead, overtaking the troops of Rundstedt by several hundred kilometers. Guderian was already behind the Dnieper when Kleist had just taken Rovno. What if he didn't take it? What if, in accordance with Purkaev's plan, he would get stuck near Rovno or near Dubno? Moreover, if he, having lost at least 50 percent of his tanks during the breakthroughs of our defense, would suddenly be hit by a whole armored armada of six Soviet mechanized corps? Where, in this case, could Kleist's tankers and Reichenau's infantrymen be in the first days of July? And do not call Maxim Alekseevich Purkaev a dreamer. Suffice it to recall that for every German soldier the Southwestern Front could put two of its own in the field, and for every artillery and mortar barrel of the enemy there were two

ours.

Then the most interesting things would begin. Since the troops of the Southwestern Front, in this course of action, had the opportunity, unlike the enemy, to preserve their main forces, very tempting prospects opened up before them. In the north, the rear communications of Army Group Center were open to attack. In the south - the open flank of the German 17th Army. There were enough forces to deliver both the main and auxiliary strikes. It is clear that the main blow should have been delivered to the rear of von Bock's armies. By that time, the attack groups of Army Group Center were so far away that the Germans simply had nothing to fend off the blow of three or four Soviet mechanized corps. In what an extremely bad situation the German troops could find themselves in the main strategic direction! In one fell swoop, all supply lines were cut off, rear communications were cut. The soldiers of Guderian and von Kluge fighting near Smolensk would have been left without shells and cartridges, without sausages and schnapps, without fuel, without stocks of medicines, without evacuation of the wounded. Moreover, the Army Group "Center" turned into a nut clamped in a vise, which, on the one hand, was squeezed by the mechanized corps of the Soviet Southwestern Front raiding the rear, and on the other, by the troops of the Western and Reserve

fronts. It is very interesting to imagine how the Germans would have had to get out of such a situation. Let's remember

how Soviet tankers had to blow up combat vehicles left without fuel. Note that the cruising range of the main German tanks T-III and T-IV did not exceed 120 kilometers. In any case, the primary task for the Germans was to restore order in their rear, restore supply lines. They could no longer advance. But here's the question: would the tank groups of Hoth and Guderian have been able to go from Smolensk more than 300 kilometers to clear their rear? After all, simply by the nature of their actions, they could not carry significant reserves of fuel with them. Perhaps the Germans would have had to blow up some of the tanks before meeting the enemy. One way or another, but all this meant a complete failure of the Eastern Campaign in the summer of 1941! And we would not have had to, choking on blood, drive the Germans out of our land for three long years.

An equally unpleasant surprise for the right flank of Army Group "South" could be a strike by mechanized and rifle units of the right-flank Soviet armies. Of course, the fighting could take a protracted character. But the German 17th Army would have to linger for a long time in the Lvov area. Moreover, the aggravation of the situation in the main strategic direction would force the German command to hastily withdraw troops from other directions, as was done on the eve of Operation Typhoon. Accordingly, the pressure on the Southwestern Front would decrease, which created the conditions for stabilizing the front line. Therefore, it is very unfortunate that the Military Council listened to the words of Purkaev only when it was already too late. There was also another scenario. Its

initial condition is similar - the non-simultaneous exit of mechanized corps to the areas of concentration. The 8th, 19th and parts of the 4th mechanized corps will be able to pull up to the front line no earlier than June 26th. At hand there are only scattered 9th, 15th and 22nd. Therefore, the date of the offensive should have been moved from June 24 to June 25. Give the three mechanized corps available time to assemble, properly compact the battle formations. Even in these three mechanized corps there are twice as many tanks as Kleist's. Let them concentrate and organize

interaction with each other. In this case, the Germans will no longer have freedom of maneuver. The coordinated actions of Kondrusev, Rokossovsky and Karpezo will be enough to completely pin down the enemy. Moreover, a special instruction should have been sent to the commanders: maneuver! If you see a well-organized German defense in front of you, do not break through it with your foreheads, but look for weak spots and hit them. Your simultaneous onslaught in all directions is in itself very dangerous for the enemy. Pull it on yourself, make him throw all available reserves into battle. Wear it out for a couple of days, and then three more of our corps will come up and we will crush the German with our superiority. Similar orders

were to be sent to the headquarters of Ryabyshev, Vlasov and Feklenko. The front headquarters gives you a day to concentrate and prepare! Organize reconnaissance and interaction. Pull up all your lagging regiments and battalions on the march. Organize the evacuation and repair of combat vehicles that have failed as a result of breakdowns. Connect with each other.

Imagine that the mechanized corps rush into battle not one by one and in their separate parts, but with all their deployed power. Kleist's position in this case immediately becomes critical. He must simultaneously hold both the flanks and the front. He no longer has the ability to put two tank divisions on the flanks on the defensive, use one as a "duty", driving from one flank to the other as a threat from the enemy appears and continue to advance forward with the forces of the latter. Surprising as it may seem, the headquarters of the Southwestern Front for some reason did not guess to carry out a frontal attack on the German 11th Panzer Division advancing at the tip of the tank wedge. Therefore, a paradoxical situation arose when Kleist could both repel attacks from the right and left, and move forward in the center almost without interference.

Of course, in the conditions of the dominance of German aviation in the air, even with an exemplary organization of the offensive, the three mechanized corps that entered the battle first could hardly achieve the complete defeat of the 1st Panzer Group. But the losses she suffered would have been disproportionately large. And two or three days later, a new Soviet armored avalanche would roll over Kleist. Yes, only he would have practically nothing to maneuver with. In order not to lose all your tanks,

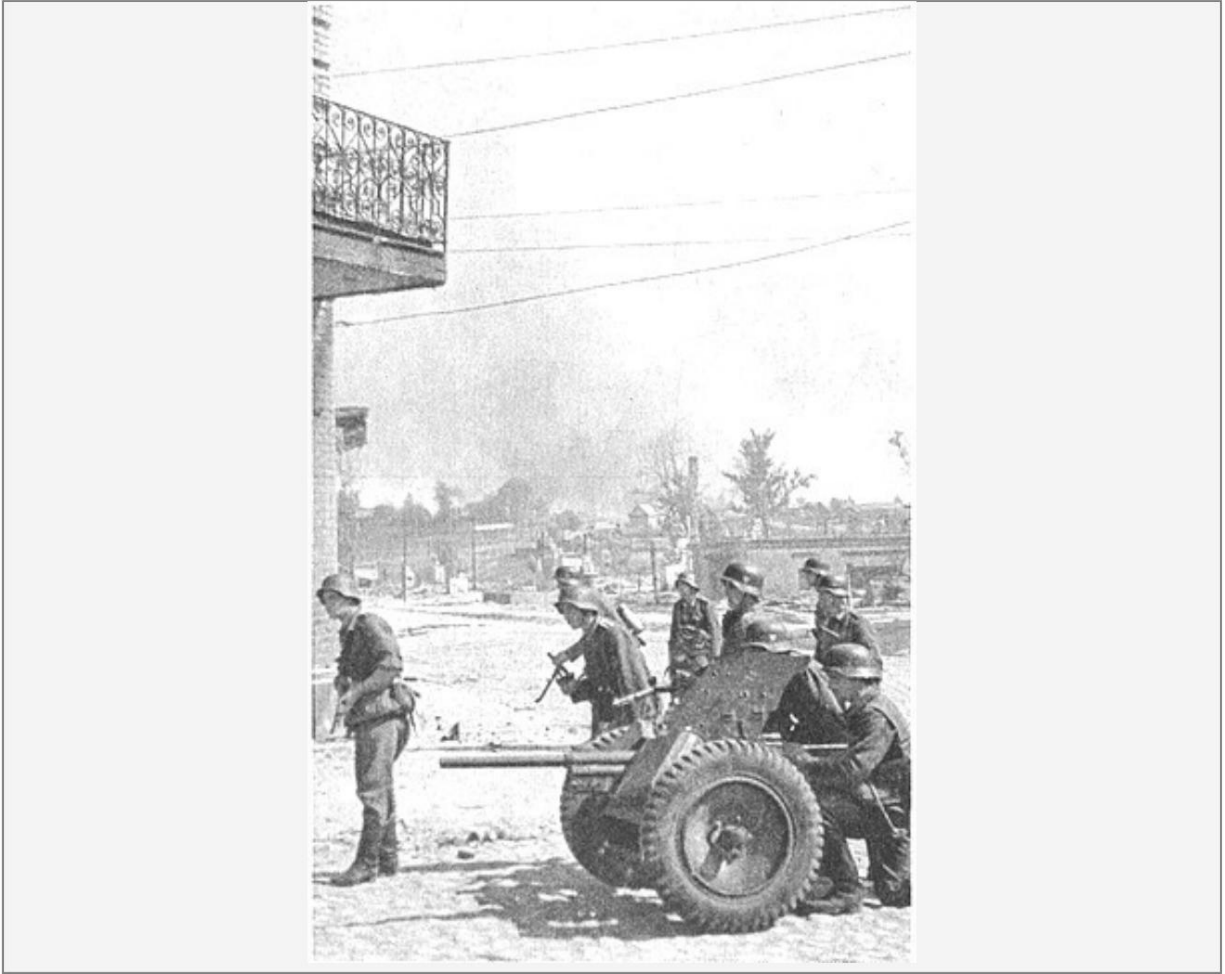
Kleist would have had to retreat, to find some line suitable for defense. Let the 8th and 19th mechanized corps attack the German positions for a day, two, three, five days. Let fierce battles unfold, as a result of which Ryabyshev and Feklenko would lose most of their combat vehicles. With such a development of the situation, their death would have a real meaning. On the line of the old border in the well-equipped fortified areas in terms of engineering, second-echelon troops would have time to deploy. That was the most important thing back then. This is what would have thwarted the rapid breakthrough of the Germans to Kyiv. They would never be able to slip through the belt of fortified areas on the

move. On June 27, the command of the Southwestern Front really considered a similar decision. The remnants of the mechanized corps were planned to be withdrawn from the battle, with the help of three rifle corps available to create a line of defense and buy time to deploy reserves along the old border. Alas, thinking is not the same as deciding. Therefore, on July 2, the Germans, allegedly weakened by the counterattacks of the mechanized corps, broke through the front line with such ease

and were able to move forward 100 kilometers. Let us recall the assertion of a Soviet historian that the German strike force was stopped for eight days as a result of the Dubna battle. It's a whole wagon of time. And this time could be well managed. Okay, the mechanized corps fell under the rout because of a stupid order. Their position was hopeless. But they were still gaining time. While the mechanized corps were dying, it was necessary to urgently implement certain measures to prevent a further German breakthrough. It is not entirely clear why nothing has been done.



***A German horse-drawn battery crosses into
Soviet territory. Summer 1941***



The crew of the German 37 mm anti-tank gun is ready to support the advance of the infantry. Summer 1941



A column of light Soviet T-40 tanks. Summer 1941



Soviet T-26, abandoned by the crew. Summer 1941



Short stop on the way to the front.

A female soldier handing out fresh newspapers to soldiers. The photograph clearly shows that most of the Red Army, even junior commanders, wear boots with windings. Summer 1941



The quarters of the 35th infantry division of the Wehrmacht mark buildings in the captured Soviet settlement with symbols for the needs of their unit.

To establish the exact affiliation of motorcyclists to a particular unit allows the conditional icon [fish] on the sidecar of the motorcycle. Zundapp. Summer 1941



The machine-gun crew of the German mountain infantry unit supports the advance of their comrades with fire. Summer 1941



Soviet column destroyed from the air. Autumn 1941

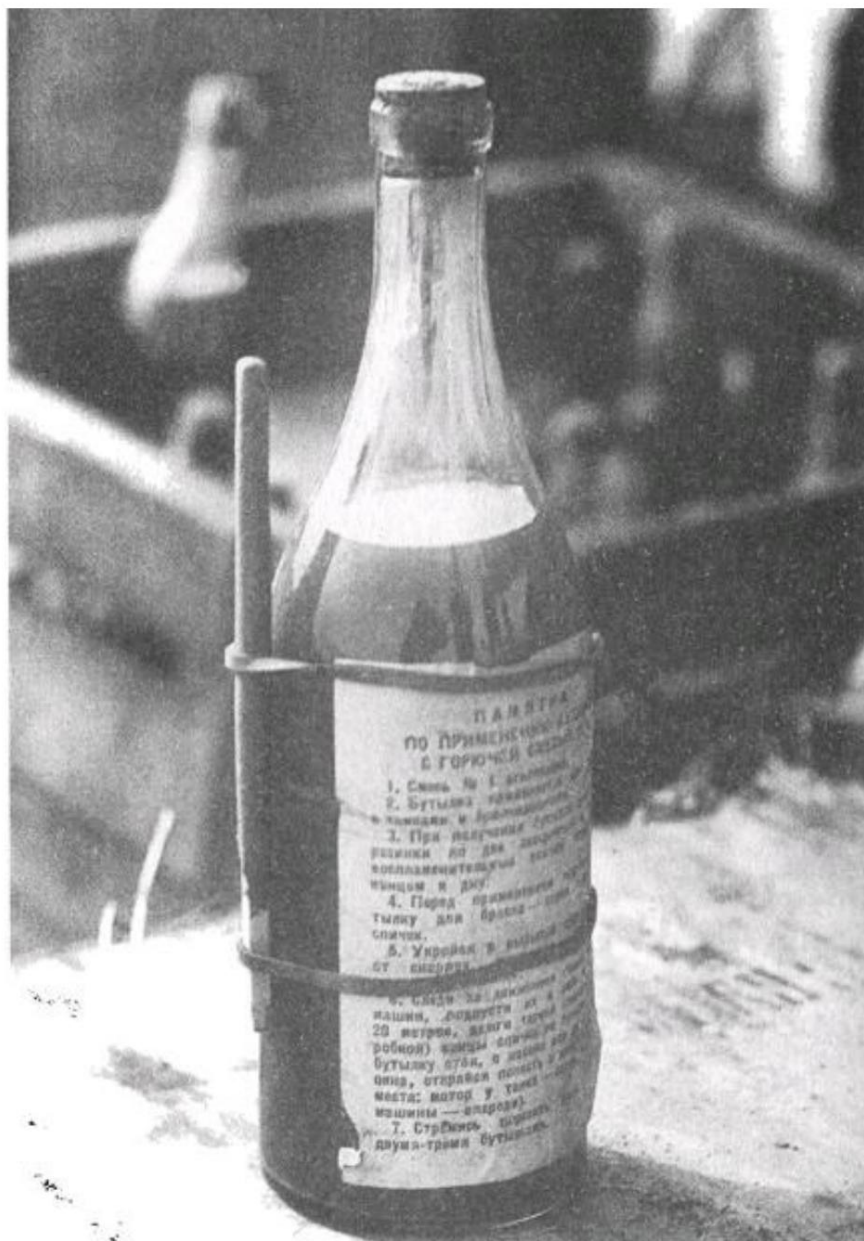


The KV-1 tank is moving to defend Leningrad.

The inscription is visible on the tower: "Let's defend the gains of October." Autumn 1941



***A battery of 85-mm anti-aircraft guns covering
St. Isaac's Cathedral is firing at the enemy.***



Autumn 1941 Molotov cocktail, the so-called "Molotov cocktail".

This primitive weapon in capable hands became a formidable force against enemy armored vehicles. Autumn 1941

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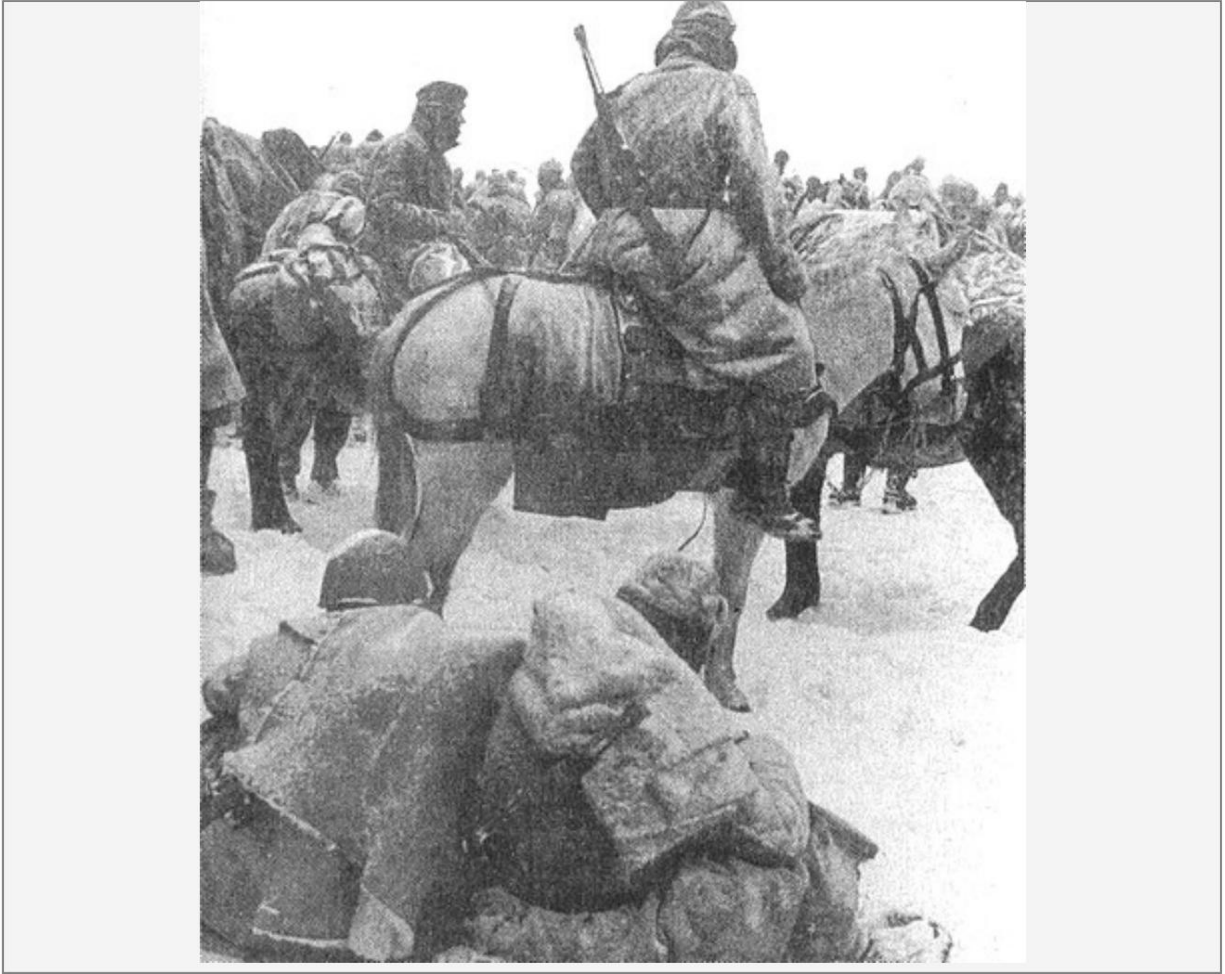


Red Army soldier in a sheepskin coat.

Unlike Wehrmacht soldiers, Soviet soldiers are better supplied with winter uniforms. Winter 1941/42



A self-propelled gun of the German 5th Panzer Division moves into position. Winter 1941/42



Not only the Red Army opposed the Wehrmacht, but also the notorious "General Frost".

The photograph clearly shows that in the winter of 1942/43 the German army experienced the same suffering as the French troops of Napoleon, who retreated from Russia in the winter of 1812.



The indispensable air worker is the Po-2 aircraft. Spring 1942



Soviet marines have lunch in between battles. Summer 1942

Chapter

5 Battle for Kyiv

On August 21, 1941, Field Marshal von Bock, commander of Army Group Center, received a directive from Hitler's Headquarters. Its content was as follows:

“The proposals of the High Command of the Ground Forces dated August 18 to continue operations in the East are at odds with my plans.

I order: The

most important task before the onset of winter is not the capture of Moscow, but the capture of the Crimea, the industrial regions of the Donets Basin and the blocking of the routes for the Russians to bring oil from the Caucasus. In the north, such a task is the encirclement of Leningrad and the connection with the Finnish troops.

The very favorable operational situation that has developed as a result of our troops reaching the Gomel-Pochen line must be immediately used to carry out the operation of Army Groups "South" and "Center" in converging directions. The goal of this operation should not be to push the 5th Russian Army across the Dnieper with the forces of the 6th Army alone, but to destroy the enemy before his troops can withdraw beyond the Desna-Konotop-Sula line. Thus, the troops of the Army Group "South" will be provided with the opportunity to reach the area east of the middle reaches of the Dnieper, and with their left flank, together with the troops operating in the center, continue the offensive against Rostov and Kharkov. It is required of the Army Group Center that, regardless of plans for subsequent

operations, it allocate for the above-mentioned operation such a quantity of forces that would ensure the completion of the task of destroying the 5th Russian Army and at the same time allow the army group to repel attacks enemy in the center

direction at such a line, the defense of which would require a minimum expenditure of forces.

The capture of the Crimean peninsula is of paramount importance for ensuring the supply of oil from Romania. By all means, up to the introduction of motorized formations into battle, it is necessary to strive for a quick crossing of the Dnieper and an offensive of our troops on the Crimea before the enemy manages to bring up fresh forces.

Only a tight blockade of Leningrad, a connection with the Finnish troops and the destruction of the 5th Russian army will create the prerequisites and release the forces necessary so that, in accordance with the Addendum to Directive No. 34 of August 12, a successful offensive against the Timoshenko group of troops could be launched and defeated.

Heinz Guderian, in his memoirs, wrote in detail about the daring attempt made to convince Hitler. He, on his own initiative, flew to the Fuhrer's Headquarters in East Prussia and was received for a report: "Hitler agreed to listen to me, and I listed in detail all the points that speak in favor of an attack on Moscow and against an attack on Kiev. I emphasized that, from a military point of view, it was only necessary to finish off the enemy, who was pretty battered in recent battles. I described how significant Moscow is, unlike, say, Paris ... I did not forget about the mood of the soldiers - they expected only an attack on Moscow, and nothing else, and prepared for this offensive with great enthusiasm. I tried to explain that victory in this decisive sector, along with the subsequent defeat of the main enemy forces, would facilitate the capture of the industrial regions of Ukraine; having lost Moscow as a communications hub, the Russians will face enormous difficulties in moving troops from north to south. In response, Hitler declared that "my generals understand nothing about the economic side of the war." In doing so, he made a fatal mistake, losing the last of his remaining chances to achieve, if not victory, then the largest strategic success in 1941. On the Southwestern Front during this period, the situation developed in this way. 5th Army of General M.I.

Potapova continued

hold the Korostensky UR and the area south of Polesie. In the Kiev fortified area, the 37th Army under the command of AA Vlasov staunchly defended. South of KiUR, the 26th Army of General F.Ya. Kostenko. The 6th and 12th armies in the Uman direction have so far held back the onslaught of the troops of Colonel-General

Stulpnagel. But this precarious balance did not last long. Since the left flank of the Soviet troops did not rely on powerful fortified areas, the German command found a weak spot in the enemy's defenses precisely here and delivered a powerful blow at the junction between the 26th and 6th armies. Vasilevsky very briefly mentioned further events in his book AM: "On August 2, the main forces of the first tank group of fascists, together with the troops of the 17th army, managed to intercept our communications, and then encircle the 6th and 12th armies in the Uman region"[81] . Taken at the request of the Commander-in-Chief of the South-Western Direction, Marshal S.M. Budyonny's counterattack by the forces of the 26th Army with the aim of releasing those surrounded in the Uman cauldron did not give any result. On August 12, Kleist completed the liquidation of the Soviet troops in the ring. The Germans took 103 thousand prisoners, captured 300 tanks, 850 guns. Generals Muzychenko and Ponedel

In addition, in early August, the Germans managed to achieve another tactical success, which further complicated the situation of the Southwestern

Front. On August 8, the 2nd German Army and the 2nd Panzer Group went on the offensive in the direction of Mogilev - Gomel and Roslavl - Starodub against the troops of the Central Front, covering the Bryansk, Gomel, Chernigov directions. On August 19, the Germans took Gomel. Guderian's tanks made a deep breakthrough from Roslavl, reaching the Starodub-Unecha line and cutting the Gomel-Bryansk railway. Thus, the German tank

wedge moved far ahead, creating favorable prerequisites for reaching the flank and rear of the troops of the Southwestern Front.

In order to prevent a threat to the troops of the Central and Southwestern Fronts, the Headquarters of the Supreme High Command on August 14 decided to create the Bryansk Front. Lieutenant General A.I. was appointed its commander. Eremenko. The troops of the new front included the 13th Army of General K.D. Golubeva and the 50th Army

General M.P. Petrov. In total, they had 19 rifle, 4 cavalry and one tank divisions.

AM Vasilevsky spoke in detail about how the new commander was received in the Kremlin: "The Supreme Commander-in-Chief greeted Andrei Ivanovich very warmly and cordially. A.I. Eremenko behaved with great dignity, very resourcefully answered all questions. "Yes," he said, "the enemy is strong, but, of course, it is possible to beat him, and sometimes it's not so difficult. You just have to know how to do it."

I.V. Stalin briefly but clearly outlined the overall situation on the Soviet-German front, paying particular attention to the Western and South-Western directions ... After listening to Stalin, the newly appointed commander of the Bryansk Front very confidently stated that "in the next few days, of course" defeat Guderian. This firmness impressed the Supreme.

- Here is the person we need in these difficult conditions,
- he threw after Yeremenko, who was leaving his office [82] — .

On August 24, the Headquarters considered it expedient to disband the Central Front and unite it under the command of Eremenko. The 3rd and 21st armies and the mobile group of General Ermakov, the 108th tank and 4th cavalry divisions, were additionally added to the troops of the Bryansk Front. In the course of a telegraph conversation on this occasion between the Headquarters and the headquarters of the front, Stalin promised even more significant reinforcements: "We can send you one of these days, tomorrow, in extreme cases the day after tomorrow, 2 tank brigades with a certain amount of KB in them and 2-3 tank battalions ... If you promise to defeat the scoundrel Guderian, then we can send several more aviation regiments and several PC batteries. Your Answer?

- ... My opinion on the disbandment of the Central Front is as follows: due to the fact that I want to defeat Guderian and will certainly defeat, then the direction from the south must be firmly secured ... Therefore, I ask the 21st Army, connected with the 3rd, to subordinate me ... And about We will certainly try to beat this scoundrel Guderian . "[83] —

In the meantime, early on the morning of August 25, the "scoundrel Guderian" presented his opponent with a new unpleasant surprise. His 17th Panzer Division famously crossed the Sudost River, knocking down the 269th and 289th Rifle Divisions from their positions. Here it is necessary to clarify that their defense

consisted of the infamous "individual rifle cells", which is why the Germans overturned them with such ease. On the same day, Major General Model's 3rd Panzer Division managed to capture the 700-meter bridge across the Desna east of Novgorod Seversky unscathed. On it, German tanks went for a walk in an avalanche along the rear of the Southwestern Front.

Eremenko took hasty measures to defeat the enemy that had broken through. On August 29, the 13th Army and the mobile group of General Ermakov launched counterattacks in the Roslavl and Novozybkov directions against the flank of the 2nd Panzer Group. Guderian recalled: "On August 29, large enemy formations, with the support of aviation, attacked the 24th motorized corps from the south and west. The corps was forced to stop its own attacks by the forces of the 3rd Panzer and 10th Motorized Infantry Divisions ... The 10th Motorized Infantry Forced the Desna north of Korop, but Russian counterattacks, combined with constant attacks by large enemy forces on the right flank, forced it to retreat. Defeat was avoided only by throwing every single soldier of the division into battle, including bakers. The Russians also attacked the 47th motorized corps, transferring the 108th and 110th tank brigades from Trubchevsk for this. The valiant 17th Panzer Division had a hard time . "[84]

In addition, by decision of the Headquarters of the Supreme High Command, on August 29, an air operation began against the 2nd tank group. The Air Force of the Bryansk and Reserve fronts, the aviation of the Reserve of the High Command were involved in the operation. In total, more than 450 combat aircraft took part in it. For the first time since June 22, Soviet troops operated under conditions of complete air supremacy. In the directive of the Headquarters of the Supreme High Command of August 29, Eremenko was tasked with destroying Guderian's tank group and developing a further offensive on Krichev, Propoisk in order to reach the Petrovichi-Klimovichi-Novozybkov line by September 15. This would mean the defeat of the right flank of Army Group Center.

Guderian found himself in a difficult position. He demanded that the command reinforce its troops with the 46th motorized corps, which stood idle near Smolensk. However, only the Grenadier Regiment "Grossdeutschland" was sent to him. Against only the 10th motorized infantry division, the 10th tank brigade, 24th, 42nd, 143rd and 293rd were thrown

rifle divisions. Nevertheless, Guderian's soldiers bit into the left bank of the Desna with their teeth, and the Soviet troops failed to dislodge them from there. In the meantime, the 17th and 18th tank and 10th motorized infantry held the flanks, the 3rd and 4th tank divisions continued to advance towards Konotop.

It took Stalin only four days to make sure that Eremenko was “not the right person” who was needed in these difficult conditions. On September 2, the Supreme Commander-in-Chief sent a telephone message of very unflattering content to the commander of the Bryansk Front:

“The headquarters is still dissatisfied with your work. Despite the work of aviation and ground units, Pochep and Starodub remain in the hands of the enemy. This means that you pinched the enemy a little, but you failed to move him. The Headquarters demands that the ground troops act in cooperation with aviation, drive the enemy out of the Starodub-Pochep region and defeat him for real. Until this is done, all talk about completing the task remains empty words. The rate orders everyone to contribute

united by the forces aviation
decisive successes of the ground forces. Guderian and his entire group must be smashed to smithereens. Until this is done, all your assurances of success are worthless. We are waiting for your reports about the defeat of the Guderian group.”[85] .

Meanwhile, the situation on the left flank of the Southwestern Front also escalated. Kleist's 1st Panzer Group began to move. In the Kremenchug area, the Germans crossed the Dnieper and captured a small bridgehead on the left bank. Their intentions were obvious: to break through towards Guderian's tanks and pincer the Soviet troops. The situation on the right flank did not bode well. She continued to steadily deteriorate. Guderian was additionally transferred the 1st Cavalry Division and the SS Reich Motorized Infantry Division, through which he could strengthen his flanks. Despite

continuous enemy attacks, the 3rd and 4th Panzer Divisions continued to advance.

On September 4, the Germans managed to find weaknesses in the Soviet defense. The commander of the 4th Panzer Major General von Geyr reported to Guderian that it made sense to stop the offensive in the Korop area, where the Germans faced fierce resistance, and strike in the direction of Sosnitsa, at the junction between the 13th and 21st Soviet armies. The commander of the 3rd Panzer Major General Model even more pleased his commander by reporting that there were practically no enemy troops in front of him in the area of the villages of Spasskoye and Mutino. Guderian immediately ordered him to cross the Seim River and cut the Konotop-

Belopolye railway. On September 7, Model's tankers took Konotop. Attacks against the German bridgehead south of Kremenchug were unsuccessful. On that day, the front command reported to Budyonny and Shaposhnikov, chief of the General Staff, that the threat of encirclement of the 5th and 37th armies was clearly indicated. Front Chief of Staff Major General V.I. Tupikov proposed to withdraw both armies to the line of the Desna River. But, as noted by A.M. Vasilevsky: "At the mere mention of the cruel need to leave Kyiv, Stalin lost his temper" and for a moment lost his composure. We, apparently, did not have the necessary firmness to withstand these outbursts of irrepressible anger, and a proper understanding of the full extent of our responsibility for the inevitable catastrophe in the South-West direction "[86] . Here, as they say, there is nothing

to add. On September 9, Model's 3rd Panzer Division made a new breakthrough between Baturin and Konotop and rushed to Romny. Attacks of the 38th army of General D.I. Ryabyshev to the Kremenchug bridgehead were repulsed, the 1st Panzer Group, in turn, struck and advanced in the direction of Lubny. All counterattacks undertaken by the Bryansk Front failed. The capture of Yelnya by the troops of the Reserve Front had no effect on the pace of advancement of the 2nd Panzer Group. Therefore, on September 11, Colonel General M.P. Kirponos decided to directly appeal to Stalin with a request to allow the withdrawal of the armies of the Southwestern Front to the line of the Psel River.

However, a telephone conversation with Stalin gave little hope to Kirponos. Moreover, he finally convinced that the Supreme

The commander-in-chief does not understand the situation at all. He explained his refusal to authorize the withdrawal of troops from the Kiev fortified area by the fact that this would lead the Southwestern Front to disaster: "Your proposal to withdraw troops to the border of the river known to you seems dangerous to me ...

In this situation on the eastern bank of the Dnieper, the withdrawal of troops proposed by you will mean the encirclement of our troops, since the enemy will attack you not only from Konotop, that is, from the north, but also from the south, that is, Kremenchug, and also from the west, since when our troops are withdrawn from the Dnieper, the enemy will immediately occupy the eastern bank of the Dnieper and begin attacks. If the Konotop enemy group connects with the Kremenchug group, you will be surrounded. As

you can see, your proposals for an immediate withdrawal of troops without the fact that you prepare a line on the Psel River in advance ... can lead to disaster. What is the way out? The output might be:

First. Immediately regroup forces at least at the expense of KiUR and carry out desperate attacks on the Konotop enemy group in cooperation with Eremenko ... Second.

Immediately organize a defensive line on the Psel River or somewhere along this line, placing a large artillery group with a front to the north and west and withdrawing 5-6 divisions beyond this line ... Finally stop looking for lines for retreat, and look for ways of resistance and only

resistance"[87] . All these instructions contained so much surrealism that the front commander decided to recall the directive of August 19, which allowed the withdrawal of the 5th Army beyond the Dnieper. But Comrade Stalin cannot be fooled on the chaff:

"Proposals for the withdrawal of troops come from you and from Budyonny, the commander-in-chief of the southwestern direction. Here are excerpts from Budyonny's report of the 11th: "Shaposhnikov pointed out that the Headquarters of the High Command considers the withdrawal of parts of the South-Western Front to the east to be premature ... If the Headquarters of the High Command is not able to concentrate such a strong group at the moment, then the withdrawal for the Southwestern Front

is quite mature." As you can see, Shaposhnikov is against the withdrawal of units [It is interesting that Vasilevsky in his memoirs cites the opposite opinion of the Chief of the General Staff. - Auth.], and the commander-in-chief for the withdrawal ... Kiev should not be left and bridges should not be blown up without special permission from the Headquarters "[88] .

Stalin's stubborn intention to continue the defense of Kyiv, even at the cost of the death of five armies, as usual, was dictated by political reasons. On July 12, 1941, an agreement was signed in Moscow between the governments of the USSR and Great Britain on joint actions in the war against Germany. US President Roosevelt in August 1941 sent a message to Stalin with a proposal to extend Lend-Lease to the Soviet Union. And what can the Red Army demonstrate to the allies? Are the defeats one more severe than the other? No! Kyiv must be kept at any cost. Budyonny clearly did not justify the hopes placed on him, succumbed to panic. This means that in order to stabilize the situation in the southwestern direction, another, more resolute and firm commander-in-chief must be sent there.

AM Vasilevsky noted this characteristic feature of the Stalinist leadership style: "Stalin proceeded from the fact that if the fighting does not develop as it should, then it is necessary to urgently replace the leader. The transfers concerned the entire apparatus of the People's Commissariat of Defense, the General Staff and the leadership of the troops. However, such an attitude towards personnel did not always give positive results"[89] . Moreover, the Stalinist cadres were one universal type. This circumstance clearly made itself felt during the change of command in the southwestern direction.

September 13 Marshal S.M. Budyonny handed over the affairs to Marshal S.K., who arrived from Moscow. Timoshenko. The latter has already managed to demonstrate his military leadership skills on the Western Front. However, it was too late to apply them. The situation that Tymoshenko inherited from her predecessor was essentially hopeless. The gap between the 13th and 21st armies in the Novgorod-Seversky region reached 75 kilometers. German troops poured into these "gates", which had nothing to oppose. On the day of Tymoshenko's appointment, Chief of Staff of the Southwestern Front

sent a report to Headquarters stating that the situation was becoming more complicated at an increasing pace: the enemy, who had broken through to Romny, Lokhvitsa and Veseliy Podil, Khorol, could only be counteracted by scattered units of local garrisons and fighter detachments, and his advance was proceeding without resistance. The 38th Army, drained of blood by attacks on the bridgeheads, retreated to the east, as a result of which a new gap appeared in the front line on the left flank and Kleist's tanks rushed there at full speed. Another gap was made at the junction between the 5th and 37th armies in the Kobyzhchi area. The Supreme

Commander-in-Chief personally answered the panicker: "Major General Tupikov, number 15,614, submitted a panic report to the General Staff. The situation, on the contrary, requires the preservation of exceptional composure and restraint by commanders of all levels. It is necessary, without succumbing to panic, to take all measures to maintain the position occupied and to hold the flanks especially firmly. Kuznetsov and Potapov must be forced to stop their retreat. It is necessary to impress on the entire composition of the front the need to fight stubbornly, without looking back. It is necessary to steadily carry out the instructions given to you by Comrade Stalin on September 11." [90] . Vasilevsky remarked: "After this, the leadership of the Southwestern Front had only to fulfill its duty to the end."

Neither on September 13, nor on September 14, nor on September 15 did Timoshenko give an order to withdraw troops from the Kyiv trap. The current situation was one to one reminiscent of the tragedy of the 3rd and 10th armies in the Bialystok ledge. The new commander-in-chief could not but understand this. But, as Admiral N.G. Kuznetsov: "These people did not know how to act independently, but only knew how to carry out the will of Stalin, who stood above them" [91] . Therefore, on September 15, the advanced units of the tank groups of Guderian and Kleist joined in the Lokhvitsa area. The 5th, 26th, 37th armies, part of the forces of the 21st and 38th armies were surrounded.

Only on the night of September 17-18, the Headquarters of the Supreme Command sent an order to the headquarters of the South-Western Front to leave Kyiv. It is clear that in the conditions of the boiler, the command quickly lost contact with lower headquarters and command and control. In a matter of hours, the encircled armies ceased to exist as organized military formations, breaking up into a mass of detachments and groups that acted in isolation from each other. The situation was aggravated by the fact that the

neither the troops of the Bryansk nor the Southern fronts could help the encircled. A.I. Eremenko was wounded and evacuated to Moscow, his units were drained of blood. Therefore, Timoshenko began to throw at the enemy any individual divisions, regiments and brigades that were at hand.

On September 17, the remnants of the 13th Army launched a counterattack in the Konotop region, where the German 10th Motorized Infantry Division and the Great Germany Grenadier Regiment were defending. The blow was repulsed.

On September 18, the 129th tank brigade, the 9th cavalry and 100th rifle divisions under the general command of Major General A.P. Belova went on the attack on Romny. Guderian noted in his memoirs: "On September 18, the situation in Romny became critical. In the morning, from the left flank, the sounds of battle were heard, becoming more and more fierce. Fresh enemy forces were moving towards Romny in three columns. They were already half a mile deep into the city. We had at our disposal two battalions of the 10th motorized infantry division and several anti-aircraft batteries. Our air reconnaissance suffered greatly from the superiority of the enemy in the air ... However, in the end we managed to defend both the city and our field headquarters . On September 21, Timoshenko launched a new counterattack in the Glukhov area. The reinforcements_

that arrived from Kharkov started fierce battles with the 17th Panzer Division of Major General Arnim, who was defending here. For three days there was a bloody struggle, but the Germans held the city.

On September 25, Timoshenko resumed attacks on Glukhov, and also tried to storm Belopolye and Yampol. Guderian's soldiers repulsed all the attacks of the Soviet troops.

The next day, the Germans completed the liquidation of the Kyiv pocket. They captured 665 thousand prisoners, 3700 guns, 850 tanks. The commander of the 5th Army, General M.I., was captured. Potapov. The front command was killed in full strength: commander M.P. Kirponos, member of the Military Council M.A. Burmistrov, chief of staff V.I. Tupikov. With the destruction of five Soviet armies, a gap almost 200 kilometers wide was formed in the southwestern direction. The Germans opened the road to the Crimea, Kharkov and Rostov. Soviet military leaders assessed the results of the battle for Kyiv in different ways. For example, S.M.

Shtemenko wrote: "On the defensive line prepared by the people of Kiev along the Irpin River, Soviet troops, together with the people's militia, fought to the death for 70 days. Enemy

I was forced to avoid frontal attacks, to look for gaps in the disposition of our troops. Only on September 15, the tanks of Guderian and Kleist, bypassing Kiev from the north and south, finally connected in the Lokhvitsa area ... The Kiev battle slowed down the pace of the advance of the avalanche of enemy troops in the South-Western direction and allowed us to gain time to prepare defenses on new lines "[93] . The — thought is correct: if we had left Kyiv in time, we would not have forced the Germans to surround us.

A more balanced assessment was given by A.M. Vasilevsky: "The serious setback that befell us in this sector of hostilities sharply worsened the situation on the southern wing of the Soviet-German front. There was a real threat to the Kharkiv industrial region and Donbass. The fascist German command got the opportunity to reinforce Army Group Center again and resume the offensive against Moscow .

— .

A major failure that might not have happened

G.K. Zhukov, A.M. Vasilevsky, I.Kh. Bagramyan in his memoirs unanimously speak of the inevitability of our troops leaving Kyiv. And also that the only way out of the situation that had developed on the Southwestern Front was the speedy withdrawal of the armies of Potapov and Kuznetsov beyond the Dnieper in order to level the front line along some naturally strong line. Stalin was of a different opinion. AM Vasilevsky explained this by the fact that "Stalin, unfortunately, took seriously the persistent assurances of the commander of the Bryansk Front A.I. Eremenko in an unconditional victory over Guderian's group. While "... and B.M. Shaposhnikov and I believed from the very beginning that the Bryansk Front did not have sufficient forces for this. "But," adds Vasilevsky, "they also succumbed to the assurances of his commander . "[95]

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G.K. Zhukov cites a fragment of his telephone conversation with the Chief of the General Staff, in which he spoke about the potential capabilities of the Bryansk Front: "... Personally, I continued B.M. Shaposhnikov, - I think that the formed Bryansk

the front will not be able to stop a possible attack by the enemy's central grouping. True, he added, Lieutenant General Eremenko, in a conversation with Stalin, promised to defeat the enemy grouping acting against the Central Front and prevent it from reaching the flank and rear of the Southwestern Front.

I knew what the troops of the Bryansk Front, which was being created in a hurry, were in a combat sense, and therefore I considered it extremely necessary to once again urgently report to the Supreme Commander-in-Chief on the need for the fastest withdrawal of all troops of the right wing of the Southwestern Front across the Dnieper River. Nothing came of my recommendation . "[96] Like this! One can only be surprised at Stalin's stubbornness. But

there is one dubious moment. A day or two before the telephone conversation with Shaposhnikov [his date G.K. Zhukov does not remember exactly], the commander of the Reserve Front sent a telegram to Stalin, in which he warned of the possibility of a catastrophe near Kiev. The possible intention of the enemy, pointed out G.K. Zhukov, defeat the Central Front and, having reached the Chernigov-Konotop-Priluki region, defeat the armies of the South-Western Front with a blow from the rear. In order to avoid this danger, he recommended to Stalin as soon as possible to create a large grouping of our troops in the Glukhov-Chernigov-Konotop region and with its forces to strike at the flank of the advancing enemy. The strike force must include 10 rifle divisions, 3-4 cavalry divisions, at least a thousand tanks and 400-500 aircraft[97] .

Such forces, according to G.K. Zhukov, would be enough to defeat the "scoundrel Guderian." A.M. agrees with this opinion of his. Vasilevsky, who pays very close attention in his memoirs to Zhukov's prophetic telegram addressed to the Supreme Commander of August 19, 1941 [98] . If we recall the composition of the

armies of the Bryansk Front, then the number of troops under the command of General Eremenko even exceeded the recommended G.K. Zhukov list of forces and means of the strike force. Only the 13th and 50th armies had 19 rifle, 4 cavalry divisions, attached to the Headquarters 450 combat aircraft. This is without taking into account the 3rd and 21st armies of the disbanded Central Front transferred to Eremenko on August 24. True, the number of tanks

did not reach a thousand. But Guderian did not even have five hundred tanks. It is not clear why our marshals believed that the Bryansk Front had "not enough" forces? In

fact, there were enough forces. Moreover, it was enough not only to complete the task of destroying Guderian's tank group, but also to try to defeat the entire right flank of Army Group Center. It was precisely this task that Stalin set before the Bryansk Front. Yes, and the "self-confidence" of the front commander noted by AM Vasilevsky is easy to understand: having air supremacy in the area of \u200b\u200bthe offensive operation, a significant superiority over the enemy in both manpower and equipment, he had every reason not to doubt victory.

But with Guderian, the situation was exactly the opposite. Moreover, during a report to Hitler on August 23, having failed in an attempt to convince him to continue the attack on Moscow, Guderian directly asked his Supreme Commander not to disperse the forces of the 2nd Panzer Group before throwing to the southwest. Hitler promised. And on August 24, on the eve of the offensive, Guderian received an order from the command of Army Group Center to withdraw the 46th motorized corps to the reserve. In his memoirs, he noted that this order was "the greatest disappointment" for him. The already small forces were cut by a third before the most difficult operation against a very strong enemy! Therefore, from the very beginning, the position of the 2nd Panzer Group was extremely unfavorable. Guderian himself was rather skeptical about his chances: "The 29th motorized infantry division had already covered an area 75 kilometers long along the Desna and the upper reaches of the Sudost. Even after the 29th motorized infantry was replaced by infantry units, the length of our left flank ... was about 170 kilometers, and yet the main operations, and therefore the main dangers, were just beginning!

Intelligence on the strength of the enemy on our left flank was extremely incomplete. In any case, it should have been understood that the task of protecting this flank would require the entire 47th motorized corps to be involved. The combat power of our attack was further weakened by the fact that the 24th motorized corps had to begin the task without a single day to rest and repair equipment - and this after a series of long continuous battles and marches !

Thus, the commander of the Bryansk Front had two obviously winning combinations in his hands. His four armies were opposed by two German corps. The enemy soldiers are exhausted. The material part has not been put in order and has not been replenished since June 22, so the shortage is at least 25 percent. Guderian has no reserves. He cannot hit with his armored fist at full power. As he moves southwest, his flank will stretch more and more. Based on this, two options are possible. Inflict the main blow on the flank, and the auxiliary on the attacking

units of the enemy in order to pin them down. Having broken through the defenses on the flank, go to the rear of the troops following on the edge of the tank wedge and defeat them. Then strike at the enemy units defending on the flank, which in this case turn out to be cut in two. Destroy them one by one. Inflict the main blow on the flanks of the tank wedge, the auxiliary

blow on the defending enemy troops. Do not give him the opportunity to maneuver, transfer some of the forces to help the attacking group. Clearly interacting with aviation, defeat the advancing enemy troops. Then, with all your might, fall on the second German motorized corps. Actively use such an advantage as air supremacy when defeating it.

Most importantly, the implementation of either of these two decisions did not require the surrender of Kyiv to the Germans. Why give it to the enemy, why withdraw the 5th and 37th armies beyond the Dnieper, if the defeat of the 2nd tank group put an end to the plans of the German command to encircle the Southwestern Front? So Stalin's demand to continue the defense of Kyiv

was quite legitimate. More appropriate was the organization of a flank strike. Three divisions of the 47th motorized corps were stretched out along the front with a length of 170 kilometers. Therefore, the density of their defense left much to be desired. Moreover, it tended to be further dispersed. The joint between the 2nd Panzer Group and the infantry divisions of the 2nd Army was not covered. On the contrary, Guderian wrote in his memoirs that the infantry was moving at right angles to the offensive line of his tank group, and the command of the 2nd Army for the entire duration of the battle did not deign to send in support of the t

not a single soldier. Therefore, the most profitable solution for the commander of the Bryansk Front was to break through the German defenses.

Without a doubt, there were vulnerabilities in the combat formations of the 47th motorized corps. They had to be identified by careful reconnaissance of the enemy. In order to mislead the Germans in other areas, it was advisable to create "noise", to carry out distracting attacks. And with all your might, strike at the tactically most optimal weak spot in the enemy's defense. Introduce mobile tank and cavalry units into the breach, and ensure reliable defense along the flanks by the forces of rifle and anti-tank units. Thus, the troops of the Bryansk Front intercepted enemy communications, created a threat to the tank wedge. In itself, the appearance of Russian tanks in the rear would have forced Guderian to stop the 24th motorized corps. An auxiliary attack on the front of the German advanced units would create a situation in which the 24th motorized corps would either have to turn back, to connect with the main forces, or take up all-round defense. But in any case, his further advance to the south, to Konotop, Romny and Lohvitsa, would be impossible. Ultimately, this is exactly what was required of Eremenko. However, the commander of the Bryansk Front chose a different solution. He brought down the

main blow on the flanks of the 24th motorized corps. In principle, there was a very real possibility of defeating him. But only with proper organization of interaction. Meanwhile, Eremenko repeated the standard error of the summer of 1941: the Soviet troops attacked the enemy without communication with each other, at different times, and therefore left Guderian freedom of maneuver. He did not fail to take advantage of this: "On August 29, large enemy formations, with the support of aviation, attacked the 24th motorized corps from the south and west. The corps was forced to stop its own attacks by the forces of the 3rd Panzer and 10th Motorized Infantry Divisions. He completed his task of clearing the western bank of the Sudost from enemy troops, and the 4th tank moved through Novgorod-Seversky to help the 3rd tank "[100]. The next day, Guderian moved the 4th Panzer to the other flank. After assisting the 10th Motorized Infantry Division in repulsing the attacks of the Soviet troops, it moved further south.

I must say that the Headquarters did not approve of the decision taken by Eremenko. In the telephone message mentioned above, Stalin pointed out to the commander of the Bryansk Front that he had made a mistake: "... Despite the work of aviation and ground units, Pochep and Starodub remain in the hands of the enemy ... The Headquarters demands that the troops ... kick the enemy out of the Starodub, Pochep region and defeat him for real" . That's right: the defeat of the flank would immediately put Guderian in a critical position. But since the 47th motorized corps was attacked only by the 108th and 110th Soviet tank brigades, and the latter appeared in the battle area only on September 1, the Germans were able to withstand the onslaught of the enemy.

However, the possibilities of countering Guderian's 2nd Panzer Group were by no means exhausted by the forces of the Bryansk Front alone. If the Headquarters of the Supreme High Command and the General Staff believed that his forces were not enough, then a larger-scale operation should have been carried out. On July 14, 1941, the Reserve Front was formed. It included the 24th, 28th, 29th, 30th, 31st and 32nd armies. Of course, by the time of the described events on the Southwestern Front, part of these troops perished in the battle of Smolensk. Nevertheless, on August 25, 1941, the Reserve Front had four armies.

Calm settled in the front line. The Germans went on the defensive. Therefore, there was a real opportunity to decide where to send troops. And the decision suggested itself: in the neighborhood the Bryansk Front, which did not have enough strength. The Germans are going to carry out major offensive operations in the southwestern direction, and their intentions are known to the Soviet command. Not only did Hitler make an unforgivable mistake, at a critical moment for the Red Army, he gave his troops a "stop order" in the main strategic direction. Here is the opinion of A.M. Vasilevsky: "The delay in the enemy's offensive in the main Moscow direction was a major strategic success for us. The Soviet command received additional time to create

powerful new reserves, and to strengthen Moscow"[101] . At—
Hitler's headquarters there were "serious discussions about the need to change the whole plan of the company", the Soviet Headquarters managed to form and put up two more armies in the Moscow direction - the 33rd and 34th. Hitler also made a second mistake: he framed

The Red Army flank of its group attacking the Southwestern Front. And gave him nothing. Discussions at the

Fuhrer's Headquarters were far from over when the Chief of the General Staff of the Red Army G.K. Zhukov already foresaw the plans of the fascist invaders. On July 29, on the last day of his stay in this high post, he made a report to the Supreme Commander-in-Chief:

- In the Moscow strategic direction, the Germans will not be able to conduct an offensive operation in the coming days ... They do not have large strategic reserves here to ensure the right and left wing of Army Group Center ... - What do you

propose? asked I.V. Stalin. - First of all, to strengthen the Central Front, transferring to it at least three armies, reinforced by artillery ... - What are you, - asked I.V. Stalin - do you think it is possible to weaken the direction to Moscow?

— No, I don't think so. In 12-15 days we can transfer from the Far East at least eight fully combat-ready divisions, including one tank division. Such a group of troops will not weaken, but will strengthen the Moscow direction ... The Southwestern Front must be completely withdrawn beyond

the Dnieper. — But what about Kyiv? asked I.V. Stalin. "Kyiv will have to be abandoned," I replied, "in the western direction, it is necessary to immediately organize a counterattack in order to eliminate the Elnin ledge. The enemy can use this foothold to attack Moscow.

- What other counterattacks are there, what kind of nonsense? - I. V. Stalin —

flared up ...[102] . Nonsense is not nonsense, but there are indeed questions to this report. First of all, if the Germans in the Moscow direction cannot take offensive actions, then what is the point of organizing a counterattack in order to eliminate the Yelnin salient? G.K. Zhukov, in his famous telephone message addressed to Stalin, reported: "The enemy's possible plan is to crush the Central Front ... defeat the Southwestern Front with a blow from the rear. After that - the main blow to Moscow, bypassing the Bryansk forests "[103] . A similar opinion was shared by the General Staff: "In the first half of August

The Supreme High Command and the General Staff believed that in the future the enemy's efforts would mainly be directed towards the capture of Moscow. At the same time, it was considered most likely that the enemy this time would launch flank attacks with powerful tank groups, bypassing the main forces of the Western Front and Moscow itself, from the north - through Kalinin, from the South - from the Bryansk region, -

through Orel and Tula "[104] [Note](#) that that the Elninsk ledge, as a springboard for an attack on Moscow, is not mentioned anywhere. At the same time, the main threat looms over the Southwestern Front, and the Bryansk Front, which fends off the German offensive to the south, is, in the general opinion of Soviet military leaders, too weak to carry out the tasks assigned to it. What is the conclusion? And the conclusion was drawn as follows: to leave the Southwestern and Bryansk fronts to their fate and attack the Elninsk ledge, which the Germans do not need for an attack on

Moscow. This is the impression. In fact, the purpose of the offensive operation of the Reserve Front was different. It was by no means about some kind of "liquidation of the springboard for the throw on Moscow." On August 25, a new, absolutely correct decision was made at Headquarters to strike at the troops of Army Group Center, which had gone over to the defensive, and, if successful, attack the rear of the 2nd Panzer Group. Let us turn to the memoirs of AM Vasilevsky: "He [Stalin] downplayed the threat of encirclement of the main forces of the front, overestimated the ability of the front to eliminate the threat with its own forces, and even more overestimated the offensive undertaken by the Western, Reserve and Bryansk fronts in the flank and rear of a powerful enemy grouping that struck at the northern wing of the Southwestern Front"[105] . Another thing is that such an offensive in the area of the Elnin ledge was a mistake. And all the arguments about the

"bridgehead for throwing on Moscow" were invented retroactively. The reasons for the decision are clear. Since the Germans plan to deliver their future attacks on Moscow with powerful tank groups, the natural desire of the Soviet command is to deprive the enemy of such an opportunity by destroying Guderian's 2nd Panzer Group. If it does not exist, there is no strike on Moscow. The loss of the 2nd Panzer Group and, qui

the Soviet troops. Zhukov reported to Stalin that Army Group Center had no reserves. They really didn't exist. With the loss of the 2nd Panzer Group and the 2nd Army, a gap will appear on the right flank of Army Group Center, which there is nothing to close. It is on this gap that it will be necessary to hit with all the

might. Was there any reason to consider such a plan unrealistic and impracticable? No. Both the flank and the rear of Guderian were open to attack. It is a fact. The troops of the Bryansk, Reserve and Western fronts could free up forces without interference to deliver such a strike. The forces of three fronts were enough to eliminate one, and the advancing tank group was not at full strength. Therefore, AM Vasilevsky was wrong to accuse Stalin of "understatement" and "overestimation." The possibilities were simply brilliant. and Kyiv

you don't have to leave.

Here the Bryansk Front dealt a blow to the head of the 2nd Panzer Group and pressed on its flank. What is Guderian's reaction? "Given the attacks on both flanks and the increased pressure of the Russians on the front, especially in the sector of the 10th motorized infantry division, I had more and more doubts that the available forces were sufficient to continue the offensive. And I asked the command of the army group to return the 46th motorized corps to me. However, on August 30, only the Grossdeutschland Infantry Regiment was sent to me. And in the future, reinforcements to Guderian came, as he himself put it, "an hour on a teaspoon." Apparently, at the headquarters of Army Group Center, some people strongly disliked the illustrious tank general and did everything to ensure that he

wrenched his neck in that operation. On September 6, Guderian turned to Field Marshal von Bock himself in command with a request to reinforce the tank group with the 46th motorized corps. He notes the limited combat power of all his units, the urgent need for rest and recovery after two and a half months of exhausting fighting and heavy losses. Instead of tanks, they send him the 1st Cavalry Division. And the flank is stretching. There is nothing to defend the rear at all, since on August 31 the last reserve, the bakers, was exhausted. There is no doubt that in the

event of a strike by two or three armies of the Reserve Front in the rear of the 2nd Panzer Group, only a memory would remain of it. This front included at least

five hundred tanks, which Guderian simply had nothing to oppose. Here is what he wrote about the deplorable state of his troops: "Then I visited several units of the 3rd Panzer Division and talked with Lieutenant Colonel Münzel, commander of the 6th Panzer Regiment. On that day [September 15], Münzel had only one T-IV tank, three T-III tanks and six T-II tanks, that is, only ten tanks remained from the whole regiment . Even the connection with Kleist in Lohvitsa turned out to be useless, since the appearance of large Russian forces in the rear of the 2nd Panzer Group inevitably frustrated the whole plan of the operation to encircle the troops of the Southwestern Front. Thus, instead of a grand victory, the Germans would have suffered a grand defeat. Instead of continuing offensive operations, they would be forced to go on the defensive, which means they would lose the initiative. And Operation Typhoon would have remained on paper. However, the Soviet command, for

some reason, chose the most disastrous path. The well-fortified Yelninsky ledge became the place for the breakthrough of the German defense. G.K. wrote about the conditions for the offensive of the 24th Army on Yelnya. Zhukov: "The enemy countered the advancing divisions with a dense artillery and mortar fire shield." And further: "Recently, the enemy has used tanks and aircraft in separate groups and only to repel our attacks in the most important areas. Apparently, he transferred these funds to other areas . For what others? Near Kyiv, where, while the Reserve Front was storming Yelnya, the Germans were completing the destruction of five Soviet armies. By the way, G.K. Zhukov noted on this occasion: "Despite the severity of the hostilities and the success of this operation, the conversation at Headquarters on July 29 did not come out of my memory. Did we make the correct strategic forecast in the General Staff?"[109] . Gold words! —

However, the unsuccessful counterattacks of the Bryansk and Reserve fronts still did not create the final situation of the catastrophe of the Southwestern Front. There was an obvious possibility of avoiding it. Since nothing came of the defeat of the "scoundrel Guderian", it was necessary to withdraw the troops to the line of the Psel River in a timely manner, as suggested by M.P. Kirponos. In this case, a fat piece with a whistle flew past the wide-open fascist mouth. Her armored

jaws would click empty. The entire offensive operation conceived at Hitler's Headquarters, all the losses suffered by the tankers of Guderian and Kleist would have been thrown to the wind. Moreover, the situation for the Germans deteriorated significantly.

What did the preservation of a million-strong group of Soviet troops in the South-Western direction mean? First of all, the stabilization of the front. During the offensive, the Germans suffered heavy losses and they simply had nothing to break through a new defensive line on the Psel River. The fighting here would either take on a positional character, or, more likely, would cease. The Germans needed an operational pause to replenish troops, regroup, and develop new plans.

Recall Hitler's directive of August 21, 1941. What great importance he attached to the capture of the Donets Basin, Crimea, Rostov, Kharkov. And most importantly: "Only a tight blockade of Leningrad ... and the destruction of the 5th Russian army will release the forces necessary for ... an offensive against the Timoshenko group of troops." But with the timely withdrawal of the armies of the Southwestern Front from the Kyiv trap and the creation of a new frontier, Hitler would not have seen the Donbass, the Crimea, Kharkov, or Rostov. The appearance of a 200-kilometer gap was ruled out, so instead of breaking through into the operational space, the Germans would have to storm the positions held by the million-strong Russian army. Here they would no longer be up to the attack on Moscow. And if they undertook such an offensive, then a great opportunity would open up to deliver a powerful blow to their flank. Or transfer additional forces to the Moscow direction and prevent the enemy from coming so close to the

capital. With the correct organization of offensive operations of the Bryansk, Western and Reserve fronts, there was a real opportunity to keep Kyiv. Yes, and with the forces of the Bryansk Front alone, it was still possible to complete the task of defeating the 2nd Panzer Group. But since the time has come to leave Kyiv, it means that it should have been left. Because, paraphrasing the well-known aphorism of Field Marshal M.I. Kutuzova: "With the loss of Kyiv, Russia is not lost."

Chapter

6 Smolensk offensive battle

From the very first days of the war, when the western strategic direction was designated as the main one, the Headquarters of the Supreme High Command sought to reliably block the Germans from reaching Moscow. But the German offensive rolled on the capital at a faster pace. On July 10, 1941, the advanced units of the 47th motorized corps of the 2nd tank group crossed the Dnieper near Bykhov. On July 11, the 24th motorized corps carried out a successful crossing north of Kopys. Actually, these events became

the beginning of the Smolensk battle. Despite the scale, Soviet history, marshals and generals in their memoirs pay little attention to the Battle of Smolensk. For example, AM Vasilevsky devotes only two paragraphs to him: "Of the defensive battles of the Soviet troops carried out in the summer and autumn of 1941, the battle of Smolensk occupies a special place. Along with the stubborn resistance offered to the enemy in the Luga region and the heroic struggle of the Soviet troops in the South-Western direction, it marked the beginning of the disruption of the "blitzkrieg" against the Soviet Union, forced the enemy to make adjustments to the notorious "Barbarossa" plan.

The battle of Smolensk lasted two months and included a whole series of fierce operations that took place with varying success for both sides and were an excellent, albeit extremely expensive, school for developing military skills for a Soviet fighter and commander, a valuable school for the Soviet command, up to and including the Supreme High Command, in the organization of a modern battle against such a stubborn, strong and experienced enemy, in the command and control of troops in the course of a fierce, often changing forms of struggle"[110] . That's practically all. No details about the operations carried out, the list of forces and means involved, losses. Only from the memoirs of G.K. Zhukov, one can get a general, but still incomplete idea of the course of the Smolensk battle. But it could become a fateful turn in the war.

The German command saw the possibility of a rapid exit of the mobile units of Army Group Center to the near approaches to Smolensk and the prospects that opened up in connection with this. General Halder noted in his diary: "... The enemy is no longer able to create a continuous front, even in the most important directions. At present, the command of the Red Army, apparently, sets itself the task of using all the reserves available to it to wear out the German troops with counterattacks as much as possible and delay their offensive, possibly to the west ... At 12.30, the report from the Führer [in rate] ... In conclusion, a discussion of the issues raised took place. Summary: The

Führer considers the following to be the most desirable "ideal solution":

Army Group Center must encircle and liquidate the enemy grouping operating in front of its front by bilateral coverage and, having thus broken the last organized resistance of the enemy on his extended front, open the way to Moscow. As both panzer groups reach the areas indicated in the strategic deployment directives, it will be possible to temporarily delay the Gotha panzer group [in order to use it in support of Army Group North or for further advance to the east]. The tank group of Guderian, after reaching the area indicated to her, should be sent to the south or south-east direction east of the Dnieper to support the offensive of the Army Group "South" ... "[111] . Thus, the main burden of the fight in the upcoming battle for Smolensk had to be borne by two German tank groups, which were still separated from the main forces. The 4th and 9th armies

at that time were only advancing to the combat area after the liquidation of the Minsk pocket. Heinz Guderian wrote in his memoirs that he was well aware of the full extent of the risk. On July 9, he had a rather tense conversation with Field Marshal von Kluge, who was opposed to forcing the Dnieper without infantry support. Nevertheless, Guderian stubbornly defended his point of view. At the same time, its tankers have not rested a single day since June 22, and replenishment in the materiel was not expected in the near future.

After crossing the Dnieper, the units of the 2nd Panzer Group were assigned the following tasks: the 24th

motorized corps to move along the Propoisk [Slavgorod] highway. — Roslavl. Be ready for possible enemy counterattacks on the flanks: on the right from the Zhlobin-Rogachev region and on the left from Mogilev;

The 46th motorized corps should have advanced through Gorki and Pochinok to Yelnya, while being wary of the enemy's threat from the right,

from the Mogilev area. The most difficult task was set before the 47th motorized corps, which was to

capture Smolensk. Bypassing Smolensk from the north, the 3rd Panzer Group was to advance. Yartsevo was appointed as the point of connection between parts of Goth and Guderian. At the same time, three Soviet armies defending the

Smolensk region were surrounded. The unflattering assessment given by General Halder to the state of our defense was generally shared by G.K. Zhukov: "Despite the introduction of a large number of formations that arrived from the internal districts into battle, we failed to create a stable strategic defense front ... The arriving troops were often brought into action without full concentration, which negatively affected the political and moral state of the units and their combat stability.

The weakness of our operational-tactical defense consisted mainly in the fact that, due to the lack of forces and means, it was impossible to create its deep separation. The defense of units and formations, in essence, was of a linear nature. Very few tank units remained in the fronts and armies. Under such conditions, a fierce battle for Smolensk unfolded[112] . But, on the one hand, speaking of the lack of forces and means, Zhukov at the same time mentions the organization on July 14 of a new front of reserve armies consisting of the 29th, 30th, 24th, 28th, 31st and 32nd th Army under the command of Lieutenant General A.I. Bogdanov, from which most of the troops were transferred to the Western Front. In addition, in order to cover Moscow on the distant approaches to it, on July 18 it was decided to create a new front of the Mozhaishk line of defense, where the newly formed 33rd and 34th armies were concentrated. It must be assumed that the Stavka believed that such powerful forces had nothing to do on the defensive. Because the best defense is an attack.

By the beginning of the German offensive, six Soviet armies were directly in the Smolensk direction. 22nd Army under the command of Lieutenant General F.A. Ershakova covered Smolensk from the northwest. Her neighbor on the left was the 19th Army, Lieutenant General I.S. Konev. On the sector from Vitebsk to Orsha, the 20th Army under the command of Lieutenant General P.A. took up the defense. Kurochkin. To the south, along the left bank of the Dnieper to Rogachev, the 13th Army operated, commanded by Lieutenant General F.N. Remezov. In the Smolensk region, the 16th Army of Lieutenant General M.F. Lukin. On the southern wing of the Western Front was the 21st Army, the command of which was entrusted to the former commander of the Northwestern Front, Colonel General F.I. Kuznetsov. But for the reasons listed above, they did not create a solid front, so on the first day of the offensive, the Germans managed to make breakthroughs everywhere. On July 13, in the zone of the 22nd Army,

Goth's tanks broke into the defenses north of Polotsk and rapidly advanced towards Nevel, with the goal of reaching the rear of the Soviet troops. In order to avoid the threat of encirclement, General Ershakov began to withdraw from the Polotsk fortified area. Developing the offensive, German tanks captured Nevel on July 16, and on July 20 entered Velikiye Luki. In order to eliminate

the German breakthrough, the Headquarters of the Supreme High Command moved the 29th Army from the reserve to this area. A joint counterattack by units of the 22nd and 29th armies managed to drive the enemy out of Velikiye Luki. The 19th Panzer and 14th Motorized Divisions of the Gotha Group, operating here, undertook a roundabout maneuver to the south. But their advance was again stopped. Since this area was not of decisive importance, the Germans stopped offensive operations and went on the defensive.

The main events developed near Vitebsk and south of Mogilev. By striking at the joint between the 22nd and 20th armies, the main forces of the Gota tank group made a breakthrough north of Vitebsk and rushed to Rudnya. Having repelled a hastily organized counterattack by units of the 19th Army, Goth's tanks broke into Velizh, Demidov and Rudnya by the end of July 13. Thus, the threat of the enemy engulfing the right flank of the Smolensk grouping of Soviet troops was clearly indicated.

An equally threatening situation developed on the left flank. Guderian's motor corps broke through north and south of Mogilev. At the same time, the 47th motorized corps advancing on Smolensk became the first German military unit to experience the impact of Soviet jet mortars - Katyushas. But at that moment, the Katyushas had no effect on the pace of advancement of Guderian's tanks. The Germans bypassed their location in the Orsha area, where, in addition to the PC battery of Captain I.A. Flerov were the 1st Moscow motorized rifle and 73rd rifle divisions. All these units fell into the bag and subsequently broke through to the east on their own, having no connection with the front headqua

In Mogilev, which was bypassed by the 24th and 46th motorized corps, the 61st rifle corps of the 13th army of General F.A. was surrounded. Bakunin. Since there was no order to withdraw, the corps took up all-round defense and held the city for twelve days. But Guderian, who foresaw such a development of events, continued with the main forces to move towards Smolensk,

Roslavl and Yelnya. Near Krasnoye, the 47th motorized corps met in a fierce battle with units of the 16th Soviet army. By that time, the front commander had reassigned most of Lukin's troops to other armies. The motor corps of General Lemelsen was opposed only by the 152nd Infantry Division, a battalion of BT-7 tanks and parts of the Smolensk garrison as part of a police battalion and three battalions of the people's militia under the command of Colonel P.F. Malyshev. Nevertheless, the Germans were put up with stubborn resistance. Not wanting to get involved in protracted battles, they again took a detour. On July 16, Major General Boltenstern's 29th Motorized Infantry Division entered Smolensk. At the same time, some units of the 16th Army still managed to gain a foothold in the northern quarters of the city, located on the other side of the Dnieper. The struggle for Smolensk continued.

The Soviet command tried to seize the initiative. On July 13, simultaneously with Guderian's motorized corps, the 63rd Rifle Corps of the 21st Army under the command of General L.G. crossed the Dnieper in the Rogachev-Zhlobin region. Petrovsky. The corps had the task of reaching deep behind enemy lines and capturing Bobruisk. The 13th Army, with the forces of the 28th Rifle and 25th Mechanized Corps, struck in the direction of Gorki, where the commander of the 2nd Tank Group had planned to place his field headquarters.

Petrovsky's corps was especially successful. Since the Germans did not expect the attack at all, they were taken by surprise. Parts of the 63rd Corps were immediately recaptured from them by Zhlobin and Rogachev. By the end of the day, Soviet troops managed to advance almost 40 kilometers. The German command, seriously concerned about the possibility of a deep breakthrough by the Russians, decided to transfer significant forces to this sector from the reserve of the army group.

As for the advance of the troops of the 13th Army, his attempt led to directly opposite results. At dawn on July 14, the German 4th Panzer Division crossed the Pronya River and captured Propoisk. On July 15, German tanks were already in Cherkov, and on the 17th they reached Krichev. Since by that time the 10th Panzer Division of the 46th Motorized Corps had taken Pochinok, the shock group of the 13th Army was in pincers. Guderian recalled: "From July 13, the Russians began to take active counterattacks. About ten enemy infantry divisions moved from the direction of Gomel to the right flank of my tank group; at the same time, the Russians, surrounded near Mogilev and Orsha, made a breakthrough. All these operations were commanded by Marshal Timoshenko, belatedly seeking to deprive us of the advantages that we received during the successful forcing of the Dnieper ... Large enemy formations were held back in the area around Mogilev and east of it, east of Orsha, north and south of Smolensk "[113] . However, the most tragic fate awaited ____

Petrovsky's corps. The command of the Western Front did nothing to support his success. Meanwhile, the Germans transferred eight infantry divisions to the Bobruisk direction and closed the gap in their defenses. The 63rd Corps was unable to advance further. Timoshenko ordered to gain a foothold on the Zhlobin-Rogachev line and hold the occupied territory. The Germans did not fail to take advantage of this. When the commander of the 21st Army clearly saw that Petrovsky's corps could be cut off by the enemy, he turned to Headquarters with a request to take him beyond the Dnieper. But no one was given permission to retreat there. Therefore, the Germans, without interference, closed the ring around the 63rd Corps and proceeded to its systematic destruction. The corps commander fell on the battlefield. G.K. Zhukov stressed that "he died the death of a hero. L.G. I knew Petrovsky well, as one of the most talented and educated

military leaders, and if it were not for the untimely death, I think that he would have become a commander on a

large scale. While Marshal Timoshenko launched counterattacks, the tanks of Hoth and Guderian moved further and further into the rear of his Smolensk grouping. "All this was hard received by the State Defense Committee," recalled G.K. Zhukov, and especially I.V. Stalin. He was beside himself. We, the leading military workers, experienced the full weight of Stalin's wrath. But it must be admitted that Stalin had every reason to be angry. Twelve armies of the Western and Reserve fronts, which included 66 divisions, could not stop two German tank groups, numbering only 20 divisions. This new cruel failure at Smolensk finally led Stalin to the opinion that it was necessary to change the Chief of the General Staff. Fortunately, G.K. On the day of his appointment to this position, Zhukov said bluntly: "I cannot be the Chief of the General Staff." On July 16, the 7th Panzer Division from the Gota group captured Yartsevo and cut the

Minsk-Moscow strategic highway. The 17th Panzer Division from the Guderian group took up positions south of Smolensk, blocking the road to Roslavl. In the battles on the outskirts of Smolensk, its commander, General Weber, was mortally wounded. Guderian, who had an undoubted talent for selecting people, appointed one of his best officers, General Erich von Thom, as the new commander. Finally, on July 19, the 10th Panzer Division of the 46th Motorized Corps took Yelnya. Thus, the German tank pincers tightly squeezed the 19th, 16th and 20th armies of the Western Front. Communication with them could only be maintained through a narrow corridor in the Solovyevo area. As usual, these three armies did not receive orders to withdraw. The German command sought to squeeze the maximum out of the operational-tactical success

achieved. The commander of the 46th motorized corps, General Fitingof, on his own initiative, decided to continue the offensive from the Yelnya region in order to capture Dorogobuzh and thereby completely cut off the three Soviet armies from the main forces. Guderian approved of his decision.

However, this time the Germans managed to get ahead. To eliminate the extremely dangerous situation that had arisen, the Stavka decided to transfer 20 divisions from the armies to the commander of the Western Front

Reserve front. On their basis, five reinforced army groups were formed, commanded by Major General K.K. Rokossovsky, Major General V.A. Khomenko, Lieutenant General S.A. Kalinin, Lieutenant General V.Ya. Kachalov and Lieutenant General I.I. Maslennikov.

Marshal Timoshenko, at the direction of the Headquarters, set the army groups the task of launching counterattacks from the Belyi - Yartsevo - Roslavl region in the general direction of Smolensk, destroying the enemy troops that had broken through and linking up with the 19th, 20th and 16th armies, which continued to fight encircled in area of Smolensk. In addition, parts of the forces of the 24th Army under the command of Major General K.I. Rakutin, the task was to prevent the breakthrough of Guderian's tanks on Dorogobuzh.

On July 23, the army group of General Kachalov struck from the Roslavl region with the aim of capturing the settlement of Pochinok and reaching the rear of the 24th German motorized corps concentrated in the Elninsk ledge. Well aware of the danger, the Germans offered fierce resistance to units of the 28th Army. An additional headache for Guderian was another disagreement with Field Marshal von Kluge. He believed that the main threat from the Russians comes from the area north of Smolensk. Guderian, on the other hand, believed that the greatest danger should be expected from the Roslavl and Elninsk directions. As had happened so many times in the past, he had to fly to the field marshal's headquarters and argue with him for many hours. Then Guderian decided to use his military experience. When faced with a too stubborn enemy, he usually made a detour maneuver. In this case, such a maneuver was an appeal to Field Marshal von Bock, bypassing Field Marshal von Kluge. After listening to Guderian, the commander of Army Group Center agreed with his assessment of the situation and sent an order to the headquarters of the 4th Army to transfer all the required reserves to the 2nd Panzer Group. Moreover, to the extreme annoyance of the old field marshal, von Bock ordered the removal of Guderian's tank group from the subordination of the 4th Army. The consequences of these decisions very soon felt the Soviet troops. On the same day,

units of Rakutin's army launched an attack on the Elnin ledge. The 24th motorized corps, squeezed from both sides, immediately

found himself in a critical situation. Throw on Dorogobuzh had to be postponed until better times. Fierce battles began near Yelnya, requiring the exertion of all the available forces of General Fitingof.

On July 24, the army group of Rokossovsky delivered a blow in the direction of Yartsev. The German 7th Panzer Division, which was stationed here, was thrown back 20 kilometers. But Rokossovsky failed to complete the task - to take control of Dukhovshchina and develop a further offensive on Smolensk. On July

25, the 30th Army of General Khomenko and a group of troops of the 24th Army of General Rakutin went on the offensive against the tank group Gota from the area of the city of Bely. As in the case of Rokossovsky, at the initial stage, their promotion was carried out successfully. They traveled 50 kilometers to the Vop River, where they were stopped by the German 18th Motorized Division. The Soviet troops could not advance further. And the next day, Hoth's tank divisions completed the complete encirclement of the 16th and 20th armies northeast of Smolensk. Ten Soviet divisions fell into the cauldron. Then, on July 26, the Germans completed the liquidation of the troops of the 61st Rifle Corps

surrounded in Mogilev. According to an even worse scenario, events developed in the Roslavl direction. The 28th Army moved far ahead, 80 kilometers. At the same time, its left flank was not provided with anything. This is what Guderian did. Having received the 7th and 9th Army Corps from the reserve, he could now afford maneuvering. The 10th Panzer, 263rd, and 268th Infantry Divisions, the SS Reich Division, and the Grossdeutschland Grenadier Regiment remained in the Yelnin salient. The 3rd and 4th tank divisions were withdrawn from there and included in the strike group, concentrated west of Roslavl. The 137th and 292nd Infantry Divisions were ordered to deploy front to the west in the area between

the Oster and Desna rivers. On August 1, shock units of the 24th motorized corps crossed the Oster River. Guderian recalled: "General Model informed me that he had occupied the bridges over this river intact ... The 23rd Infantry Division advanced without encountering serious enemy resistance. The main goal of our offensive - Roslavl - was achieved" [115]. So, without much interference, Kachalov's army group was completely surrounded. Five fell into Guderian's trap

Soviet divisions. The Germans captured 38,000 prisoners, 100 tanks, 250 guns. General V.Ya. Kachalov died in battle. But since there was no one to confirm his death, Moscow considered that he had surrendered. An order was announced for the troops of the Western Front, in which Kachalov was called a "traitor and deserter." The true picture of events became clearer only after the war. Thirty years later, G.K. Zhukov wrote: "In these battles, the commander of the group, General V.Ya., died a —

hero's death. Kachalov"[116] . The offensive of the Soviet troops stopped everywhere except Yelnya. Here, appointed commander of the Reserve Front, General of the Army G.K. Zhukov decided to succeed at any cost. He achieved his goal with his characteristic willpower and perseverance. On July 30 alone, the Germans repelled thirteen attacks. But the intensity of the fighting on the Yelnin ledge did not decrease. Additional troops were

brought in from all directions. Meanwhile, Guderian ardently urged Hitler's adjutant Colonel Schmundt, who arrived at his headquarters, to influence the opinion of the Supreme Commander. It is necessary, he argued, to continue the offensive against Moscow and to abandon any operations in other directions that are not of decisive importance. But on the evening of July 30, the OKH liaison officer, Major von Bredow, brought Guderian an order to put Army Group Center on the defensive. In the Headquarters of the Fuhrer, he said, the final decision on the

course of further operations has not yet been made. In August, a relative calm settled on the Western Front. The fighting continued only in the Yelnya area. While Zhukov's troops stormed the positions of the enemy's Yelnin grouping, Guderian decided to cut off the Krichevsky ledge that threatened his left flank. On August 8, the 24th motorized corps went on the offensive. On August 13, the battle ended with the defeat of three Soviet divisions of the 13th Army. The Germans took 16,000 prisoners. In the recaptured positions, the 2nd Panzer

Group remained pending further orders until the end of August. On August 25, the day the German offensive began in the southwestern direction, Stalin demanded a new strike in the Smolensk region. At the same time, the troops of the Reserve Front were repeatedly tasked

The offensive of the Western Front, which began on August 30, quickly bogged down. The troops of Konev and Rokossovsky were drawn into protracted positional battles.

Things went a little better in the Yelnya region. G.K. Zhukov wrote: "Using the ensuing darkness and the not yet closed neck, the remnants of the enemy moved away from the Elnin ledge. On September 6, our troops entered Yelnya. The dangerous bridgehead was liquidated... We failed to complete the encirclement of the enemy and capture the Yelninskaya grouping, since there were no forces for this, and first of all, tanks "[117] . In general, nothing else could be expected after more than a month of assaults on well-fortified German positions.

The complete exhaustion of the forces of the Western and Reserve fronts forced the Headquarters to abandon further offensive operations. On September 10, the troops were ordered to go on the defensive. This date is considered the day of the end of the Smolensk battle.

Defensive or offensive?

In Soviet history, the battle of Smolensk is defined as "defensive". Summing up its results, G.K. Zhukov noted: "The battle of Smolensk played an important role in the initial period of the Great Patriotic War. Although it was not possible to defeat the enemy, as the Stavka had planned, it was not possible, but his strike groups were severely exhausted ... Soviet troops entrenched themselves at the turn of Velikiye Luki - Yartsevo - Krichev - Zhlobin. The delay of the enemy offensive in the main direction was a major strategic success. As a result, we gained time to prepare strategic reserves and carry out defensive measures in the Moscow direction"[118] .

The question arises: if the battle was defensive, then why did the Stavka plan to defeat the enemy? It is impossible to defeat in a defensive battle. The defeat of the enemy can only be achieved by offensive actions. What kind of defensive battle can we talk about if no serious preparations for defense were made? Suffice it to recall the above evidence of G.K. Zhukov about the state of our

defense. You can additionally refer to the memoirs of A.I. Eremenko, then deputy commander of the Western Front: "The capture of the southern part of Smolensk was due to the fact that at that time we had not yet learned how to organize defense in large settlements with small forces ... With minimal preparation, cities could be turned into strong strongholds that are not easy would have been overcome even with the help of aviation, artillery and tanks"[119]. But for a military man to organize defense in the city is a simple matter. Especially in a city like Smolensk, which is a natural fortress. Since this was not done, it means that the command believed that there was no such need. As noted above, the enemy was ahead of the Soviet troops in

pace. The Germans entered Smolensk when the deployment of the armies of the Reserve Front had not yet been completed. Therefore, the Soviet offensive began in somewhat different conditions than it was assumed in the Headquarters. In itself, it became another refutation of the thesis about the defensive nature of the Smolensk battle. Otherwise, why would the armies of the Reserve Front, instead of organizing a solid defense along the Ostashkov-Bryansk line, go on the offensive in very problematic conditions? G.K. Zhukov makes it clear: it was not the defense that was planned, but the defeat of the enemy. But since it was not possible to defeat it, after the battle it was transferred from the category of offensive to defensive. The chances of inflicting a crushing defeat on Army

Group Center on the distant approaches to Moscow were quite real. The Germans went on another adventure. Their forces were divided into two parts. The smaller one - the tank groups of Guderian and Hoth - had already entered the battle, and the main forces - the 2nd, 4th and 9th armies were just beginning to move into the battle area. The Soviet command had an excellent opportunity to defeat the enemy in parts. Despite the delay in the deployment of the armies of the Reserve Front. Because the armies of von Kluge and Strauss were even more late: they approached the Dnieper only on July 26.

However, the very organization of our offensive looked somewhat strange. As you know, the main principle of strategy is concentration. Its meaning is that the enemy must be beaten with a tightly clenched fist, fall upon him with full power. Meanwhile

the command of the Western Front acted in exactly the opposite way. It dispersed its forces, forming five approximately equal army groups. Moreover, these groups were also not whole. For example, the Rokossovsky group included separate units of the 16th and 20th armies, while their main forces were in the Smolensk pocket. Or the 24th Army: part of its forces entered the Kalinin group, and the rest were supposed to storm Yelnya. In addition, each of these army groups had its own offensive mission. Thus, instead of a blow with a fist, a blow was obtained with spread fingers, and even in different directions. Such a scheme of actions nullified our numerical advantage and devalued, without exaggeration, the outstanding achievements of the Headquarters in the formation of strategic reserves.

So Ershakov advanced on Velikiye Luki, Khomenko on Dukhovshchina, Rokossovsky on Yartsevo, Kachalov on Pochinok, Rakutin on Yelnya. And Petrovsky was advancing on Bobruisk, Remezov was advancing on Gorki ... Many small-scale counterattacks. Yes, even at different times. Yes, without interaction and interconnection with each other. Therefore, the Germans had freedom of maneuver and the ability to smash our advancing troops one by one. And so it happened. Goth and Guderian did not even need the support of the main forces of Army Group Center for this. They managed on their own.

However, there were other possibilities. The Soviet command understood the intention of the Germans to take Smolensk in pincers. As well as their habit of hitting at the joints. Therefore, the impact of the main German forces was to be expected in the central sector of the front. But even if Tymoshenko's headquarters had not envisaged such a development of events, the directions of the enemy's strikes on July 13 spoke for themselves. At the same time, tank wedges in the center penetrated into the depths, and dangerous ledges appeared on the flanks of the 2nd and 3rd tank groups. The counterattacks of Yershakov's army and Petrovsky's corps clearly showed that the Germans had neither significant forces nor solid defense on the flanks. Therefore, instead of several weak blows towards the main forces of Hoth and Guderian, it would be advisable to consider two solutions:

Inflict a flank attack with the main forces in support of Petrovsky's corps, an auxiliary strike in the zone of Yershakov's army. 63rd

the rifle corps found a very vulnerable spot in the enemy's defense, so its offensive should be supported to the maximum. The task of flank strikes could be either to cut off the troops of Hoth and Guderian from the main forces and encircle them, or simply to intercept the rear communications of the enemy, to disrupt the supply of his advanced units fighting far ahead, in the Smolensk region.

Inflict the main flank attack on the sector of the 22nd Army, an auxiliary one in support of the 63rd Corps. This option was preferable from the point of view that Goth's tank group was ahead of Guderian's group in carrying out the task of enveloping Smolensk. So, first of all, it is necessary to hit Goth in the rear. One way or another,

but the success of flank strikes would be obvious. Beyond the Dnieper, the Germans did not have a single tank. And their infantry is a very tempting target. So they would wrap it on the tracks of our KV. The Germans did not create a strong defense in their rear. Petrovsky's corps alone was able to cover more than a hundred kilometers. And if not one rifle corps, but two or three armies with hundreds of tanks? Yes, the Germans broke through to Smolensk. But when Kachalov broke through to Pochinok, did it follow from this that Guderian fled from the Yelnya ledge and threw all his forces into the oncoming battle with the 28th Army? No, it shouldn't. Guderian accurately identified the weak point of his opponent, hit him in the rear and completely defeated him. Marshal Timoshenko could

do the same. Let us recall what a commotion at the headquarters of Army Group Center was raised by the mere appearance of Petrovsky's corps near Bobruisk. Despite the eight divisions deployed there, the Germans still did not hold back all his forces. Guderian noted in his memoirs that a Russian cavalry group made a raid west of Bobruisk. It was commanded by General I.O. Gorodovikov. Holding back the onslaught of two or three armies with a mass of tanks would have been simply beyond the Germans' strength. Therefore, Hoth and Guderian would have had to stop their tanks, think not about an attack on Moscow, but about how to save equipment and people in the resulting critical situation. In any case, they would have been forced to send some part of their forces to fight the enemy tanks in their rear. Which in itself meant going on the defensive. And if Goth and Guderian managed to create a ring around Smolensk, then its strength would be much less and from

encirclement would come out, respectively, much more of our troops. The main thing is that the initiative would pass into the hands of the Soviet command.

Flank strikes, if not ending in the complete defeat of Army Group Center, would have led to really serious losses. Before putting their battered troops in order, the Germans would have to postpone their plans for an offensive in the southwestern direction for a long time. Soviet troops received precious time to create a solid front. Therefore, the Germans would have taken further actions under more unfavorable conditions than actually happened.

Let's consider another situation. Timoshenko squandered his reserves in unsuccessful counterattacks. The Germans successfully completed the liquidation of the Smolensk pocket and went on the defensive. Panzer Group Gotha is transferred in support of Army Group North, Guderian's tanks and the 2nd Army advance to the south-west. In Army Group Center, only the troops of von Kluge and Strauss remain, stretched out on a 400-kilometer front. They are not able to create defense in depth. They have no reserves. There are no tanks either. Aviation - the cat cried. It is obvious that a very favorable situation is being created for the possibility of conducting an offensive operation. Moreover, there may be several goals for it: a), to defeat the Army Group "Center"; b), to dislodge von Bock's troops from their positions, thus creating a threat to the flanks, and in the best case, to the rear of Army Groups "North" and "South"; c), to force the Germans either to stop offensive operations in the northwestern and southwestern directions, or to force them to transfer significant forces in support of Army Group Center, which will alleviate the situation near Leningrad and Kiev. Giving the order

for the offensive of the Western and Reserve fronts, Stalin set them the task of defeating von Bock's troops. But again, it is not clear why the Headquarters identified Demidov and Yelnya as directions for strikes. It was at these points that a solid German defense was organized. A month earlier, offensive operations of the Soviet troops had already failed here. The troops bled out, but did not advance a single step. If, say, near Yelnya, Rakutin's army has been undertaking continuous attacks since July 23,

then the enemy, accordingly, is well prepared for their continuation. That is why the capture of Yelnya turned out to be the limit of the Reserve Front's capabilities. There was no more strength to go on.

The offensive on August 30 would have been successful if the blows had not been delivered where the Germans were waiting for them, but at the weak points of the German defense. There certainly were. It was necessary to identify them and beat them there. In the area of Yelnya and Demidov, it was quite possible to confine ourselves to distracting attacks. Thus, much-needed assistance was provided to the perishing armies of the Southwestern Front. Save them - then it was the main thing. Moreover, the success of the Soviet offensive led to the failure of Operation Typhoon. The mere retreat of Army Group Center, even for 100 kilometers, created too threatening a situation for its neighbors. Before hatching plans for an attack on Moscow, the Germans would have to conduct a separate offensive operation to restore lost positions and level the front line. Without the re-occupation of Smolensk, a rush to Moscow was impossible. But time worked against the Germans. Every extra day of delay with the start of the general offensive against Moscow pulled the German army deeper and deeper into the loop of the winter campaign and protracted war, for which the Reich was completely unprepared.

Finally, the Soviet command had the opportunity to conduct a truly defensive battle. It was the simplest and cheapest option in terms of expected losses. It was necessary to give an order for the timely withdrawal of the troops of the 19th, 16th and 20th armies from the Smolensk region. Let them, together with the six armies of the Reserve Front, hold the enemy at the Ostashkov-Bryansk line. In this case, the offensive operation of Hoth and Guderian lost its meaning, because its main task was not to oust, but to encircle and destroy the Smolensk grouping of Soviet troops. So both great tankers would have remained in the cold. For the first time in his brilliant career. When conducting a defensive battle,

the opponents changed places. Now not Russian, but German soldiers would bleed when attacking an organized, dense defense. Twelve armies were quite enough to hold back the advancing enemy. The character of Guderian in the Soviet headquarters to

By that time they already knew well: when faced with a powerful defense, he immediately stopped and looked for workarounds. In the meantime, Guderian would have been in search, the Soviet troops received additional time to prepare new lines. On one of them the Germans would have been finally stopped. Thus, the exit of German strike groups to the near approaches to Moscow would be unfeasible in principle. Consequently, in the course of our counter-offensive, they would have been thrown back much further than was the case in December 1941.

With all the shortcomings in the organization and conduct of the battle of Smolensk, there was one undoubted advantage. Its results for the German side were more modest than expected. The main miscalculation of the German command was to determine the number of enemy reserves. And who knows what the fate of the war would have been if Marshal Timoshenko had managed to properly dispose of his forces.

Chapter

7 Demyansk cauldron

The defeat of the German army in the battle for Moscow caused a dangerous euphoria to appear in the Headquarters of the Supreme High Command. As Stalin himself said in such cases - "dizziness from success." Moreover, judging by the memoirs of G.K. Zhukov, each of the members of the Headquarters indulged in this dizziness in his own way. Strengthening thereby the Stalinist dizziness.

"With regard to our plans for the spring and early summer of 1942," wrote G.K. Zhukov, - I.V. Stalin believed that we still did not have enough forces and means to launch large-scale offensive operations. For the near future, he considered it necessary to confine himself to active strategic defense ... "And then all of the above is completely crossed out:" ... but along with it, conduct a number of private offensive operations in the Crimea, in the Kharkov region, in the Lgovsk-Kursk and Smolensk directions, as well as in the regions of Leningrad and Demyansk"[120] . A private offensive operation is definitely a term previously unknown to military science. In addition, the question arises: where exactly was an active strategic defense planned, if private offensive operations were supposed to be carried out on all directions and fronts?

Of course, other members of the Headquarters understood the fallacy of Stalin's plans. Position G.K. Zhukova was the following: "I knew that B.M. Shaposhnikov, in principle, was of the same opinion as I.V. Stalin, but regarding the plan of action of our troops, stood on limiting himself to active strategic defense, exhausting and bleeding the enemy at the beginning of the summer, and then, having accumulated reserves, proceed to broad counteroffensive actions. Supporting B.M. Shaposhnikov, I, however, believed that in the western direction we must definitely defeat the Rzhev-Vyazma grouping at the beginning of summer, where the German troops held a vast bridgehead and had large **forces** . Further G.K. Zhukov noted that Marshal Timoshenko supported his idea of an offensive in the western direction and, in turn,

proposed to conduct offensive operations with the forces of the Southwestern and Southern fronts. And the opinion of Marshal Timoshenko was supported by Marshal Voroshilov. In addition, according to the memoirs of AM Vasilevsky: "Given the exceptionally difficult situation in which the troops and the population of Leningrad were, the Supreme High Command took all measures to ensure that the blockade from the besieged city was lifted as soon as possible. Despite the fact that the Stavka was in dire need of reserves for the planned counteroffensive in the main Western direction, it nonetheless sent two armies to Leningrad and ... ordered the troops of the Volkhov and Leningrad fronts to defeat the enemy grouping that had reached Lake Ladoga in the Mga region and lift the blockade from Leningrad"[122]. As a result, in order not to offend anyone, it was decided to attack everywhere.

Favorable conditions have also developed in the north-western direction. Back in September 1941, Army Group North finally switched to positional defense. To ensure the Typhoon operation, significant forces were withdrawn from its composition. Field Marshal Leeb had only the infantry divisions of the 16th and 18th armies on a fairly wide section of the front from Leningrad to Velikie Luki. And not a single tank. Therefore, while planning the lifting of the blockade of Leningrad, the Headquarters at the same time hatched more ambitious

plans.

In the second half of December 1941, the General Staff developed a plan for the Demyansk offensive operation. Its implementation was entrusted to the North-Western Front, commanded by Lieutenant General P.A. Kurochkin. The purpose of the operation, firstly, was to reach the flank and rear of Army Group North by the troops of the right wing of the front. Secondly, the Northwestern Front with its left wing was supposed to cover Army Group Center from the north, while interacting with the troops of the Kalinin Front. The 11th Army, consisting of five rifle divisions, ten ski and three tank battalions, was intended to carry out the first task. The army was to strike at Staraya Russa, Soltsy, Dno and, together with the left-flank troops of the Volkhov Front, defeat the Novgorod grouping of the enemy, that is, the 16th German army.

The second task was assigned to the 3rd and 4th shock armies. They struck from the Ostashkov region and carried out a deep breakthrough at the junction of Army Groups Center and North in order to capture Toropets and

Rudnya. The 34th Army of the North-Western Front, which had five rifle divisions, was tasked with pinning down the enemy forces in the center, in the Demyansk ledge, and at the same time with flank attacks: on the right - on Beglovo, Svinora, on the left - on Vatulino, to close the encirclement around the Demyansk grouping Germans.

The offensive began on January 7, 1942 in a wide area between the lakes Ilmen and Seliger. In the zone of the 11th Army, it choked on the very first day. The 18th German motorized division, reinforced by the reconnaissance battalion of the SS division "Dead Head", was able to repulse the attacks of the Soviet troops and firmly hold positions near Staraya Russa. Thus, an attempt to reach the rear of Army Group North was immediately paralyzed, which later became one of the main reasons for the infamous tragedy of the 2nd Shock Army of the Volkhov Front. The left-

flank armies were much more successful. The 3rd and 4th shock troops successfully broke through the German defenses and developed an offensive in the valley of the Lovat River. Nevertheless, the German troops offered them fierce resistance. Therefore, the forward movement was very slow, for each step had to pay with blood.

By the end of the third week of heavy fighting, the Headquarters realized that the original plans for deep breakthroughs needed to be adjusted. The task of the troops of General Kurochkin was changed. Now the Stavka demanded to encircle and destroy only the enemy's Demyansk grouping. Fortunately, from both flanks it was possible to quite seriously wedge into the Demyansk ledge. In order to break the resistance of the Germans as quickly as possible, the Stavka deployed significant forces to help Kurochkin: the 1st Shock Army, the 1st and 2nd Guards Rifle Corps. In total - 15 fresh, fully equipped divisions, including several Siberian ones. The modified plan of the operation looked as

follows. The 11th Army was to continue fighting for Staraya Russa. On its left flank, the newly arrived 1st shock army and two rifle corps

struck from the Parfino region to the south along the banks of the Lovat and Redya rivers, cutting through the enemy's front and separating his old Russian grouping from the Demyansk. The 34th Army was to advance towards them. By that time, this army could only advance 40 kilometers. Thus, the troops of the 11th Army and part of the Stavka reserve troops created the outer ring from Staraya Russa to Kholm, and their other part, together with the 34th Army, closed the inner ring. As the scope of the front's tasks narrowed, its 3rd and 4th shock armies were transferred to the neighboring Kalinin Front.

On February 3, 1942, the Soviet offensive resumed along the entire length of the Demyansk salient. The introduction of additional forces into battle immediately made itself felt. The 7th Guards Division of the 1st Rifle Corps was the first to link up with units of the 34th Army near the village of Zaluchye. By the end of February 8, the ledge was completely surrounded. In the ring were the 2nd and 10th German army corps, which included the 12th, 30th, 32nd, 123rd and 290th infantry divisions. Together with them, the elite SS division "Dead Head" fell into the trap. In addition, ten days earlier, the neighboring 3rd shock army had achieved success by blocking the 281st German security division in the city of Kholm. In total, as a result of the first Soviet operation to encircle the enemy, it was possible to create a boiler for 7 German divisions numbering about 100,000 people. Moreover, 95 thousand were in the Demyansk cauldron, and 5 thousand were locked in Kholm.

Unfortunately, the encirclement of enemy troops does not yet mean their destruction. The Soviet command had to make sure of this in practice. Despite the fact that units of the 34th Army managed to cut the boiler into two isolated groups, the Germans continued to fight. The core of their resistance was the SS division, on which General Count Brockdorf-Ahlefeldt, who commanded the encirclement, laid the brunt of the struggle. The SS grenadiers rushed to the most threatening areas and staunchly defended the positions allotted to them. Later, Hitler highly appreciated the efforts of the SS commanders Theodor Eicke and Max Simon, handing them oak leaves to the Knight's Crosses. Despite the halving of

the food ration, exhausting battles, terrible frosts that reached 50 degrees below zero on another day, the German troops withstood the onslaught

enemy. By the beginning of March, the Soviet command stepped up the pressure and the cauldron had already broken up into several parts. But it was not possible to complete the task of eliminating it.

Meanwhile, the Fuhrer's Headquarters took hasty measures to save the encircled troops. Since there was nothing to break through the ring yet, they found a way out in the organization of an "air bridge". According to the calculations of the headquarters of the Luftwaffe Transport Aviation Command, at least five hundred aircraft of the Yu-52 type were required to solve this kind of problem. The two transport groups available to the new commander, Colonel-General Georg von Juohler, appointed instead of Field Marshal Leeb, were completely insufficient. Therefore, additional forces of transport aviation were transferred from everywhere: from the Army Group Center, from Germany, from the Mediterranean TV, D. Hitler even allocated his personal Condor and personal pilot X. Bauer for this purpose.

The main problem was that the encircled troops needed at least 300 tons of cargo per day. Meanwhile, two runways suitable for landing inside the boiler in Demyansk and Pesky could simultaneously receive no more than 40 aircraft. Things were much worse in the Hill. The territory of the boiler here was so narrow that there could be no question of any landing. Cargo for the 281st division had to be dropped by parachute. The situation was aggravated by the fact that the German command did not find the opportunity to provide transport aircraft with fighter aircraft escort. And the Russians in the area of the Demyansk ledge had the 6th air army of General D.F. Kondratyuk, which included six fighter regiments.

However, the range of problems was not limited to the delivery of goods. The encircled troops needed reinforcements in manpower. In addition, it was necessary to evacuate the wounded and sick from the boiler. This task acquired particular severity in the conditions of the Kholm'sky garrison. On February 20, a specially formed air

transport group under the command of Colonel Friedrich Morzik began the operation to supply the Demyansk boiler. In total, more than 15,000 tons of cargo and about 22,000 soldiers and officers were transferred over the "air bridge" during the period of the complete blockade.

Reinforcements to Kholm from the 218th and 329th Infantry Divisions were delivered by landing gliders. Their landing was carried out right on the streets of the city, often under fire from Soviet troops.

Despite the obvious key importance of the "air bridge" for the encircled German grouping, the Soviet command did not make adequate efforts to destroy it. For three months of functioning in conditions of complete encirclement of the boiler, a special air transport group lost only 112 aircraft. In fact, the supply of troops in Demyansk and Kholm was carried out uninterrupted. This is the main reason why not only the Demyansk grouping was not destroyed, but the entire 3rd shock army was unable to break the resistance of one German division for three and a half months. On March 19, on the orders of Colonel General Kukhler, an attack group was formed in the Staraya

Russa region, which was to break through the encirclement and restore communication with the Demyansk ledge in full. It included the 122nd, 127th, 329th Infantry and 5th and 8th Light Divisions. General Count Seidlitz-Kurzbach was to command the release operation. By the name of the commander, the deblocking troops received the name "corps group" Seydlitz "". From inside the boiler towards the corps group, the SS division "Dead Head" was supposed to strike.

The deblocking operation began on 21 March. In order to hold the situation, the command of the North-Western Front sent elite troops to this area - the 7th, 8th Guards and 384th Siberian Rifle Divisions. They offered fierce resistance to the advancing enemy. Therefore, the rapid breakthrough of the ring, which was counted on at von Juohler's headquarters, did not happen. Along the road Staraya Russa - Demyansk, where the German troops were advancing, heavy, bloody battles unfolded. Both sides suffered significant losses. The confrontation between the two elite divisions - the 7th Guards and

the SS "Dead Head" took on the most acute and cruel character. Here, more than once, it came to hand-to-hand combat. Despite the fierce opposition of their enemy, the SS grenadiers continued to slowly move forward. Generally

the average daily rate of advance of the German troops was no more than a kilometer.

The turning point in the battle came on April 20. On this day, the SS broke through to the western bank of the Lovat River, overcoming all five lines of Soviet defense. On April 23, the advanced units of the Seidlitz group reached Ramushevo and connected with the Dead Head division. So they managed to create the so-called Ramushevsky corridor. The Soviet ring was broken. In these battles, the 7th Guards Division suffered the most, in which a little more than 300 people remained in the

ranks. The Soviet command was preparing a new offensive operation to eliminate the "Ramushevsky corridor". Its width was only 6–8 kilometers. From the Stavka reserve, the North-Western Front received 5 rifle divisions, 8 rifle and 2 tank brigades. During this time, the Germans were only able to replenish the bloodless divisions in the ledge, but did not have a single soldier in reserve. Thus, General Kurochkin had enough forces and means to eliminate the "Ramushev corridor".

The offensive began on 3 May. The Soviet troops immediately felt that the Germans had not lost time since April 23 and managed to create strong defenses on both sides of the corridor. The advancing divisions found themselves under concentrated enemy fire and suffered terrible losses. Again, the "organizational" shortcomings of the summer 1941 model of the year, which consisted in the lack of proper intelligence, proper interaction and command and control of troops in real combat conditions, had an effect. A classic example of the

unsuccessful actions of troops in the Ramushev offensive operation is the assault on the village of Kulotino by units of the 235th Infantry Division. The 235th division was one of the

famous Siberian divisions. She was a regular, had good combat training. Even the enemy noted that her soldiers and officers behaved valiantly in battle. And the task set - to take a small village with the forces of an entire division - was not particularly difficult. But only with the skillful organization of the battle. On May 20, the division commander threw the 806th rifle regiment

into the assault. Moreover, the regiment advanced without artillery preparation and

enemy defense reconnaissance. The Germans converted the houses on the outskirts into bunkers. The advancing Siberians came under dagger machine-gun fire. This fire was so dense that the skirmishers lay down before they had gone halfway to the forward German trench. The

commander ordered the attack to be repeated. Then again. And further. The battle went on from seven o'clock in the morning until dusk. No results, except for unthinkable losses,

were achieved. The next day, the next regiment, the 801st Rifle, went on the attack. As on the previous day, the Germans opened deadly fire. The chains are back on. Measures were taken to raise the fighters to the attack. And they got up and went. They were mowed down by German fire. On the second day of the assault, it was also not possible to reach the German forward trench. The

bloodless regiment had to be withdrawn from the battle. May 22 came the turn of the 732nd Infantry Regiment. This time, the division commander called in tanks for support and carried out artillery preparation. Nevertheless, the artillery could not suppress all the enemy firing points. Strong fire was opened on the advancing Siberians. The neglect of reconnaissance played a fatal role: Soviet tanks ran into a minefield prepared by the Germans and did not support the infantry attack. Although one of the companies broke into the German trench, the Germans cut off the main body with concentrated fire and then launched a counterattack. The trench was broken. During the second attack, it was possible not only to recapture the trench, but also to take two bunkers.

But, like last time, this success was not supported. The fighting in the "Ramushevsky corridor" lasted more than a month. German troops held both the neck and the ledge. Moreover, under the guise of the 122nd German Infantry Division, they managed to release the Hill. The armies of the Northwestern Front suffered heavy losses. The enemy also got it hard: the "Dead Head" division alone lost 7,000 people killed. However, the Demyansk ledge remained a thorn in the side of the Soviet command for more than six months.

Mistakes that could have been avoided

The headquarters of the Supreme High Command had sufficient information about the strategic intentions of the enemy. G.K. Zhukov, in his memoirs relating to the events of early 1942, showed a clear vision by the Supreme High Command of the further development of the situation. "In general terms, Hitler's political and military strategy for the next period of 1942 boiled down to crushing our troops in the south, capturing the Caucasus region, reaching the Volga, capturing Stalingrad, Astrakhan and thereby creating conditions for the destruction of the USSR as a state.

Planning offensive actions for the summer of 1942, although the German command had a numerical superiority in people over the Soviet Armed Forces, it no longer had the ability to simultaneously attack in all strategic directions, as it was in 1941 according to the Barbarossa plan. By the spring of 1942, German troops stretched from the Barents to the Black Sea. As a result, their operational density sharply

decreased...

The Supreme assumed that the Germans in the summer of 1942 would be able to conduct major offensive operations simultaneously in two strategic directions, most likely in Moscow and in the south of the country. As for the north and northwest, I.V. Stalin, then we should expect little activity from the Germans there"[123] . What decisions were made based on such an accurate assessment of

the upcoming events? Inflict a preemptive strike on the enemy before he has yet recovered from the defeat at Tikhvin, Rostov and Moscow. It seems to be logical. However, the essence of the problem was that the Red Army also suffered losses during the

1941 campaign. And disproportionately greater than the losses of the enemy. Therefore, the resource of the Stavka's strategic reserves was limited. Not only the Germans, as our military leaders accurately determined, but also the Russians did not have enough strength for a simultaneous offensive in all directions. It was necessary not to indulge in dizziness from success, but to choose the most optimal of all directions. And on it, in accordance with the principle of concentration, to concentrate the maximum of forces and means.

Then fall upon the enemy with all our might, drive him out of our sacred land, give him no rest day or night. The whole question was what direction in the conditions at the end of 1941 - the beginning of 1942 could be considered optimal.

G.K. Zhukov recalled that Marshal Timoshenko considered the southwestern direction as such. He explained his decision by the fact that after the failure of all attempts to capture Rostov and our successful counteroffensive, Army Group South was seriously weakened. In addition, the conduct of an offensive operation in the southwestern direction is all the more important because the Germans are preparing a summer offensive there. "The troops of this direction," Tymoshenko confidently reported to Stalin, "are now in a position and certainly must inflict a preemptive strike on the Germans in order to frustrate their offensive plans against the Southern and Southwestern fronts. Otherwise, what happened at the beginning of the war will be repeated." Stalin allowed such an offensive. Although in this direction the grouping of German troops remained quite strong: the 1st Panzer Army of Kleist, the 6th, 11th and 17th armies.

Zhukov himself, as commander of the Western Front, considered his direction to be the most optimal. Here was the largest German grouping, numbering 70 divisions. That's where you need to hit her. Stalin also agreed with Zhukov.

Finally, the northwest direction. Here, the Germans had only 20 infantry divisions on a 400-kilometer front. Therefore, it was decided to attack here as well. The situation was

reminiscent of the battle of Smolensk. The same dispersal of forces, the same multitude of blows inflicted in order to win everywhere and at once. But that doesn't happen. Therefore, the results of all these private offensive operations led to a new catastrophe, quite commensurate with the summer of 1941.

Let us recall the original task of the Demyansk offensive operation. First: the defeat of Army Group North. Second: deep coverage of the left flank of Army Group Center. Of course, five rifle divisions and two tank battalions of the 11th Army, Lieutenant General V.I. Morozov was not enough to defeat the troops of von Küchler. What if the Stavka had made a different decision?

For the Demyansk operation, the Northwestern Front was allocated a disproportionately smaller number of troops than, for example, the Bryansk Front, but not for an offensive, but for delivering a powerful counterattack in the event of an enemy attack. It is "just in case", emphasizes G.K. Zhukov. That is, such an offensive was considered possible, but not mandatory. Nevertheless, the list of troops involved in the Bryansk Front looks impressive: 4 tank corps, 7 rifle divisions, 11 separate rifle brigades, 4 separate tank brigades and "a large amount of artillery." In addition, the 5th Tank Army of the Supreme Command Headquarters reserve was assigned to the Bryansk Front. And to solve the problem of defeating Army Group North, two tank battalions are allocated.

Meanwhile, before the start of the German offensive is still very far away. German troops suffered huge losses during the previous year's campaign. They need no less than three or four months for rest, replenishment, recovery. Moreover, Stalin and all members of the Headquarters know that Army Group North is the most weakened. She is not even potentially capable of any active actions. So it turns out that the northwest direction is optimal. Here success can be achieved quickly and quite cheaply. But for some reason the main forces of the Red Army are being transferred to where the most powerful enemy groupings are located. Therefore, at the time when the 11th Army stormed Staraya Russa, and the 3rd and 4th shock troops advanced to Kholm and Toropets, the 33rd Army, the 1st Guards Cavalry and the 4th Airborne corps of the Western Front. And if the troops of Lieutenant General P.A. Kurochkin to

give four tank corps? If our main forces were to be thrown against the weak forces of the Army Group "North"? In this case, a breakthrough near Staraya Russa and access to the deep rear of the 16th and 18th German armies would be ensured. After all, the only 18th motorized division held the defense there. Von Küchler did not have any additional forces, except for the SS reconnaissance battalion, for this division. A Russian tank avalanche would have swept them away. After all, it was January then. Until the spring thaw, the wagon of time. Therefore, nothing interfered with the actions of large tank formations. And the Germans had nothing to repel their massive blow. As long as they would scrape

if some reserves had sent them north, the armies of Bush and Lindemann would have been completely crushed. The

defeat of Army Group North opened up the broadest strategic prospects for the Soviet command. First of all, the 2nd shock army would have remained safe and sound. One hundred and fifty thousand of its fighters, instead of eating each other's corpses in a cauldron, could bring real benefits to the Motherland. After all, the successful actions of the North-Western Front in themselves created the prospect for the success of the Leningrad and Volkhov fronts. Leningrad would have been liberated from the iron ring of the blockade. Further, the most natural solution would be to strike at the flank and rear of Army Group Center. In such an

environment, the German command inevitably had to abandon its global offensive plans. Whether Army Group North had been in the ring or managed to slip out of it was of secondary importance. In any case, the Red Army was punching a huge gap in the German defenses that needed to be closed. There was a need to level the front line. Since Hitler categorically forbade retreat, his generals would have been forced to plan an offensive operation not in the south, but in order to "cut off" a large ledge in the north. While they would carry out the required training, remove troops from other directions, the Soviet command would get time to create a strong defense in the ledge. Accordingly, the offensive of the troops of the Southwestern and Western fronts in the spring of 1942 would have been carried out in much more favorable conditions. However, you can't throw words out of a song. Stalin and his marshals made an irreparable mistake. The strategic reserves of the Headquarters, which could have been

put to very effective use, were completely wasted in huge cauldrons, from Myasny Bor to Kerch. It is interesting to consider the lost opportunities of the second stage of the Demyansk offensive operation. As mentioned above, 7 German divisions surrounded in the Demyansk ledge

and Kholm could survive solely due to the "air bridge". Every connoisseur of history is well aware of what happened in the Stalingrad

boiler. German soldiers literally died of exhaustion. Field Marshal Paulus still had tanks and self-propelled guns, but there was no fuel for them. It was the energetic struggle of the Soviet command with the "air bridge" of the Luftwaffe, which created a situation where the soldiers of the 6th Army had nothing to eat, nothing to shoot, nothing to heal wounds and keep warm, led to a severe breakdown in the moral and psychological state of both the commander himself and his subordinates. There are testimonies of the few surviving veterans of the 6th Army about how hundreds of wounded and frostbite died due to the lack of proper medical care, how soldiers fell and died from exhaustion right on the streets. Even the Chief of the General Staff, Zeidler, was forced to write in his memoirs that the Stalingrad cauldron was falling apart on its own.

However, the German divisions surrounded near Demyansk could be in an even worse situation. If the Stalingrad frost, which reached 30 degrees, mowed down the soldiers of Paulus stronger than bullets, then in the Demyansk cauldron the temperature dropped to 50 degrees below zero. And only the SS men were provided with winter uniforms. In such a situation, the complete cessation of all types of supply meant certain death. At the same time, the Soviet troops could only wait for the Germans to either die out or surrender. The former

commander of the special air transport group F. Morzik noted in his memoirs the fact that Soviet aviation had an extremely weak impact on the "air bridge". A similar opinion is shared by domestic historians. According to their estimates, German pilots made about 2,000 sorties, while the aviation of the North-Western Front did not exceed 700. Although they admit that German aviation provided significant assistance to their ground forces. With a daily requirement of 300 tons, the "air bridge" provided

the Demyansk group with an average of 273 tons of cargo daily. 22,000 soldiers and officers were transferred over the "air bridge" to reinforce the troops in the boiler. Let's estimate: on February 8, the ring closed, and the "Ramushev corridor" was broken through only on April 23. If not for the "air bridge", then the troops of Seidlitz-Kurz Bach would have no one to save.

There were enough forces to fight the German transport aircraft. In addition to the 6th Air Army, the 2nd strike air group of the Headquarters reserve was involved to support the Demyansk operation. For example, the air forces of the 3rd and 4th shock armies additionally received six fighter, five bomber and one assault regiments. But the Germans carried out the cover of the "air bridge" from case to case. In fact, the clumsy, slow-moving, poorly armed, and therefore representing easy prey for enemy fighters, the Yu-52 were left to their own devices.

German transport aviation could be paralyzed not only by the strikes of Soviet fighters. Behind the front line, the air transport group was based at five airfields: Pskov Yuzhny, Pskov-Zapadny, Korovye Selo, Ostrov and Tuleblya. Its commander emphasized the complete lack of influence of enemy aircraft on loading airfields. If they were disabled by Russian bomber aircraft, the supply of the Demyansk boiler would be disrupted. Of course, Pskov or Ostrov were quite far from the front line. But specifically for such cases, long-range bomber aviation was created in the Soviet Air Force. Moreover, at the beginning of 1942, the aviation potential was rapidly increasing. Mr. K. Zhukov cites specific figures and facts: "Our air force got the opportunity to start forming air armies. In June we already had 8 air armies. To a large extent, long-range aviation formations began to replenish"[124]. Consequently, there were opportunities to attract DVA forces to process German airfields. Well, front-line bomber and attack aircraft could raze two German landing sites in Demyansk and Peski to the ground. If the Yu-52 had nowhere to take off and nowhere to land, then within four to five weeks all the encircled troops would be in a hopeless situation.

At worst, it was possible to destroy the German airfields inside the boiler with ground troops. Since there was no continuous front line, there were a sufficient number of gaps in the German defense. For example, airborne units specially designed for operations behind enemy lines could be sent into these gaps with the task of incapacitating landing

lanes in Demyansk and Pesky. How long would the Germans have held out without supplies?

But if the Soviet command did not attach importance to the "air bridge", then it was possible to simply destroy the boiler by force. After all, the superiority of the Soviet troops was overwhelming: 35 divisions of the Soviet 1st, 3rd, 4th shock, 11th and 34th armies, 1st and 2nd guards rifle corps acted against 7 German ones.

The answer to the question "Why?" can be obtained by looking at the map of the actions of the troops in the Demyansk offensive operation. There were indeed many of them, but they were scattered in all directions at once. Take, for example, the 11th Army. Part of her forces are storming Staraya Russa, part is advancing to the Hill, part is securing the cauldron from the north. The 34th Army operates partly along the front and two more parts along the flanks. The 3rd shock partially blocks the Hill, partially storms Velikiye Luki. The 4th shock spreads in three directions at once: to Velizh, to Demidov, to Bely. If the Germans had more troops here, they could arrange for the Red Army several small boilers. Only overwhelming superiority over the enemy allowed Soviet commanders to act so carelessly and not be punished for it.

In general, the Demyansk offensive operation is a lesson on the topic about how dangerous it is to neglect the principle of concentration.

Chapter

8 - A failed radical fracture

The calculations of the Headquarters of the Supreme High Command to snatch the strategic initiative from the hands of the enemy by conducting a whole series of private offensive operations in the winter and spring of 1942 did not materialize. Instead of new victories, a series of failures followed, significantly worsening the situation on the Soviet-German front. Particularly large damage was caused by the defeat of the troops of the Southwestern Front as a result of the Kharkov-Barvenkovskaya offensive operation. With the destruction of five Soviet armies, a gap almost 300 kilometers wide formed in the front line. After the Kharkov disaster, Stalin did not allow Marshal Timoshenko to develop plans for military operations. G.K. Zhukov pointed out another significant consequence: "Basically, I agreed with the operational-strategic forecasts of the Supreme Commander, but could not agree with him on the number of planned front-line offensive operations, believing that they would absorb our reserves and this would complicate preparations for the

subsequent general

offensive of the Soviet troops"[125] . There really were no reserves left, and there was nothing to keep the front. German troops poured into the gap formed in the South-West direction, breaking out into the operational space. In pursuance of the directive of the Fuhrer's Headquarters No. 41 of April 5, 1942, Army Group

South was divided in two. Army Group A, consisting of the 1st Panzer, 11th and 17th Armies, was to attack the Caucasus in order to capture the strategic oil-bearing regions of the Soviet Union. Army Group B, which included the 4th Panzer, 2nd and 6th German and 2nd Hungarian armies, was supposed to capture Stalingrad, intercepting the largest communication center of the Eastern Front. On July 17, 1942, the first battles began on the distant approaches to Stalingrad. In order to close the gap, the Stavka moved three fresh, newly formed armies from its reserve. Along with

topics

most

The only surviving after the Kharkov-Barvenkovskaya operation, the 21st Army, they created a new front on the enemy's path - Stalingrad. Here, the German command was not without a miscalculation in time, since the reserve armies not only managed to arrive at the place of concentration, but also had the opportunity to fully deploy. In addition, AM Vasilevsky noted in his memoirs another characteristic mistake of the German strategists - the inaccuracy in assessing the potential reserves of the enemy. Having defeated almost a million-strong Timoshenko's group, they believed that the Russians had nothing to cover the direction to Stalingrad. But in a short time, the Headquarters formed new reserves and threw them into battle.

The Stalingrad Front was created instead of the defeated South-Western Front literally out of the blue, which, of course, was an unpleasant surprise for the Germans. On the 500-kilometer strip from Pavlovsk to Verkhne-Kur-Moyarskaya, four armies occupied the defense. 63rd Army Lieutenant General V.I. Kuznetsova deployed along the left bank of the Don from Pavlovsk to Serafimovich, the 21st Army, Major General A.I. Danilov - from Serafimovich to Kletskaya, the 64th Army of Major General V.Ya. Kolpakchi - in the bend of the Don from Kletskaya to Surovikino. The line from Surovikino to Verkhne-Kurmoyarskaya was held by the 62nd Army of Lieutenant General V.I. Chuikov. Further along the Don, the 51st Army of the Southern Front occupied positions. The actions of the troops in the Stalingrad direction were supported by the 8th Air

Army of Major General T.T. Khryukin. The Germans carried out their operations according to the well-established in Russia scheme "quickness - maneuver - onslaught." Faced with stubborn resistance from the 62nd Army on the Chir River, the troops of the German 6th Army immediately maneuvered around Chuikov's left flank. Building on their success, the Germans surrounded three Soviet rifle divisions and a tank brigade in the Mayorovsky area. A gap appeared in the front line, which could be

used to reach the rear of the 62nd and 64th armies. On July 23, the Headquarters decided to launch a counterattack on the enemy troops that had broken through. General A.M. Vasilevsky. The main trouble was that the Germans too quickly defeated the newly formed reserve armies and

The rate simply did not have time to form the following ones. AM Vasilevsky immediately faced the question: how to attack? In Stalingrad, on the basis of the former 28th and 38th armies of the Southwestern Front, it was supposed to create two tank armies. But by that time, Major General S.K. Moskalenko managed to complete only the management of two tank corps, 160 tanks and one rifle division. Things were even worse in the future 4th Panzer Army, Major General V.D. Kryuchenko: 80 tanks and one rifle division. Here, in the front reserve, there was also the 57th Army of Major General F.I. Tolbukhin, but even she had only just begun to receive reinforcements after the terrible defeat near Kharkov, and in combat terms she represented little. Therefore, Vasilevsky was forced to redirect the question that arose during the study of the situation on the spot to Headquarters. There, without thinking twice, they handed over the underformed tank armies to the front with the order to throw them into battle to close the gap. At the same time, Stalin gave the order to transfer six more new rifle divisions from the strategic reserve to Stalingrad.

AM Vasilevsky recalled: "The study of the situation at the front showed that the only way to eliminate the threat of encirclement of the 62nd Army and the capture by the enemy of crossings across the Don in the Kalach region and to the north of it was to immediately launch counterattacks on the enemy with cash forces of the 1st and 4th th tank armies. The 4th Panzer Army could do this only two days later, but there was no way to wait for it. Therefore, the 1st Panzer Army had to go for an immediate strike, and then [the 4th](#) . Vasilevsky briefly reported: "The — .

counterattack did not lead to the defeat of the enemy grouping that had broken through to the Don." Therefore, the 62nd Army continued to roll back to the east. To top it off, the situation on the right flank of the 64th Army escalated: the Germans took the Nizhne-Chirskaya, thereby breaking the front line and creating another gap for a throw to Stalingrad. The Supreme Commander, endlessly receiving disappointing reports from the fronts, lost his patience. July 28 was

the famous order No. 227 was signed. Among other things, it said: "Our factories and plants in the rear are now working perfectly, and our front is receiving more and more aircraft, tanks, artillery, mortars. What do we

lack? There is a lack of order and discipline in companies, battalions, regiments, divisions, tank units, air squadrons. We must establish the strictest order and iron discipline in our army if we want to save the situation and defend our Motherland. Like this. The

Supreme Commander himself, by this order, refuted all the inventions that appeared after the war about the "overwhelming superiority of the fascist hordes" over the Red Army during the Battle of Stalingrad. AM Vasilevsky described in detail what a powerful flow of reinforcements was sent by the Headquarters: "Starting from the first half of July, the Supreme High Command systematically reinforced the troops of the Stalingrad direction at the expense of strategic reserves. In August, the influx of troops here from the depths of the country increased even more. So, from August 1 to August 20, 15 rifle divisions and 3 tank corps were sent here. And also the 1st Guards Army, the 57th Army, the 16th Air Army, the 2nd, 23rd, 28th Tank Corps and so on. And the Germans still have the same 4th tank and 6th armies. The composition of their troops since July 17, 1942 has not changed upwards. True, in mid-September the Germans nevertheless received reinforcements - the 3rd, 4th Romanian and 8th Italian armies. But it would be better if these "reinforcements" did not appear at the front at all. Sense from them was like a goat's milk. They did not

participate in the battles for Stalingrad. And at the first blow of the Soviet troops, they ran like a flock of sheep. To Stalin's extreme surprise, such simple, intelligible and, it would seem, reliable measures as detachments, penal battalions and executions did not change the situation at the front in the least. The troops continued to retreat, despite the use of the full arsenal of draconian measures. The only consolation was that the Germans approached the first defensive belt near Stalingrad and the pace of their advance became noticeable.

Soviet defenses north of Kalach and on August 23 reached the banks of the Volga northeast of Stalingrad.

On the night of August 23-24, the Supreme Commander-in-Chief arranged for his representatives G.M. Malenkov, A.M. Vasilevsky and commander of the Stalingrad Front V.N. Gordov is a real mess. "You have enough strength," Stalin reprimanded them, "to destroy the enemy that has broken through. Gather aviation from both fronts and attack the enemy that has broken through. Mobilize the armored trains and send them on the circular railway of Stalingrad. Fight the enemy not only during the day, but also at night... The most important thing is not to panic, not to be afraid of the impudent enemy and to remain confident in our success . "[128]

But neither the more and more troops being transferred to Stalingrad, nor the penal battalions and courts-martial, nor the scolding of Stalin himself - nothing helped. A.M. Vasilevsky bitterly stated: "Despite all the measures we carried out on August 23 and 24, it was not possible to eliminate the enemy who approached directly to the outskirts of the city, close the corridor and restore the situation in those days." Why? A.M. Vasilevsky gives an honest answer: "The hastily created strike groups consisted, as a rule, of rifle formations weakened in battles. The troops, sent by the Headquarters by rail, acted slowly and, without completing the concentration, were immediately brought into battle ... There was not enough time to prepare counterattacks, to work out interaction and organize command and control of troops "[129] . With this course of action, any numerical superiority over the enemy is reduced to zero. It was possible to send 20, 30, 40 armies to Stalingrad, but if they rushed into battle in regiments or divisions, they were simply crushed by the enemy. In the same way, the Soviet command fought in the border battles of 1941, in the battle of Dubno, the battle of Smolensk. With the same results.

On September 2, German troops reached the outskirts of Stalingrad. In order to prevent their further wedging into the defensive formations of the 62nd and 64th armies, Stalin instructed G.K. Zhukov, who had been on the Stalingrad front since August 26 as a representative of the Headquarters, to organize a counterattack on the flank of the enemy grouping that had broken through. To complete this task

the 1st Guards Army of General K.S. was involved. Moskalenko, 24th Army of General D.T. Kozlov and the 66th Army of General R.Ya.

Malinovsky. The armies needed at least two days to concentrate and prepare. But, as always, there was no time. On September 3, Stalin sent a telegram to Zhukov with the following content: "The situation with Stalingrad has worsened ... Stalingrad can be taken today or tomorrow if the northern group of troops does not provide immediate assistance. Demand that the commanders of the troops, standing to the north and northwest of Stalingrad, immediately strike at the enemy and come to the aid of the Stalingraders. No delay is allowed. Delay is now tantamount to a crime . "[130] And although it was no less a crime to throw unprepared troops into suicidal attacks, an order is an order. On the same day, the 1st Guards Army went on the offensive. She was able to advance only a few kilometers, inflicting minor losses on the enemy. The Germans quickly stopped her advance.

The Soviet command took a break for a day. Then on September 5, the offensive resumed along the entire

front. All three armies attacked. Watching her from the command post of the 1st Guards, G.K. Zhukov noted: "From the power of the fire with which our attacking troops met the enemy, it was clear that the artillery preparation did not give the desired results and that a deep advance of our advancing units should not be expected. Approximately one and a half to two hours later, from the reports of the commanders of the troops, it became known that in a number of sectors the enemy stopped our advance with his fire and counterattacked with infantry and tanks "[131]

The result of the battle day looked very modest. For 14 hours of continuous battle, it was possible to advance in places by 2–4 kilometers. The 24th Army did not advance a single step at all.

Knowing the perseverance of the Soviet command in achieving their goals, the Germans prepared well for the next day. Reinforcements arrived from the Stalingrad area. On a number of dominant heights, the Germans buried tanks and assault guns in the ground, organized solid strongholds that could only be broken by powerful artillery fire. "But then we had very little of it," complained G.K. Zhukov. Therefore, to storm the dominant heights with all the tanks installed there,

guns, machine guns were, as Leo Tolstoy used to say, "with a bang." On

September 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10, Soviet troops stormed the well-fortified positions of the enemy in the forehead. Until finally Generals Gordov, Moskalenko, Malinovsky and Kozlov turned to the representative of the Stavka with a demand to stop this madness. Zhukov reported to Stalin. The Supreme allowed to stop the attacks. Moreover, while the 1st Guards, 24th and 66th armies were bleeding in aimless assaults, the Germans did not waste time. Strike groups from the 4th Panzer Army of Hoth significantly widened the gap between the Stalingrad and South-Eastern fronts and continued to push the 62nd and 64th armies in the city itself.

On September 13, German troops launched a general assault on Stalingrad. The city was defended by all the same soldiers Chuikov and Shumilov, against whom the most stringent measures had previously been taken in accordance with the requirements of Order No. 227. But the German advance was carried out at a snail's pace. What's the matter? The reason was simple: the Germans lost their freedom of maneuver, they had to storm every house and pay with blood, blood and blood for every step

forward. From the second half of September, the battle for Stalingrad entered an extremely unfavorable phase of the struggle for attrition for the Germans. Now the outcome of the struggle was decided by the number of reserves. Say, during the September assault, German troops were half a kilometer from the Volga. But they were thrown back by the counterattack of the 13th Guards Rifle Division, Major General A.I. Rodimtsev. As a result of this counterattack, the Rodimtsevo division quickly exhausted its forces and was driven down from its positions by an enemy attack. Immediately, a new division, the 95th Rifle Division, arrived from the right bank of the Volga and counterattacked the Germans, again pushing them back 2–3 kilometers. The 37th Guards, 112th Rifle, 138th Rifle and so on repeated the same thing behind it. Under such conditions, the German command had to draw additional forces into the city, weakening the flanks. Already in October, there were no German troops left on both flanks at all, they were

replaced by the 8th Italian, 3rd and 4th Romanian armies. The Soviet General Staff closely monitored these movements. The development of Operation Ura

which was the encirclement of the entire grouping of German troops in the Stalingrad region. The idea of the operation was to defeat the weak Romanian and Italian troops by delivering powerful blows to the flanks and close the ring around Paulus's army. To accomplish this task, the newly created Southwestern Front [commander N.F. Vatutin], Don Front [commander K.K. Rokossovsky] and the Stalingrad Front [commander A.I. Eremenko]. While the Germans were ruining their troops in frontal assaults on the city, the Stavka was accumulating and concentrating new reserve armies on their starting positions. On November 11, the 6th Army launched the

third general assault on Stalingrad. As before, the Germans succeeded in pushing some of Chuikov's units, occupying the southern part of the Barrikady plant and infiltrating to the Volga. But they could not achieve more.

On November 19, the Stalingrad offensive operation began. The Soviet troops achieved complete surprise. The Romanian units, without offering serious resistance, turned into a disorderly flight. As a result of skillfully executed strikes in converging directions, the troops of the Southwestern and Stalingrad fronts, with the active assistance of the right wing of the Don Front, united on November 23 in the Kalach region. 22 German divisions were in the ring. This was the first major encirclement of enemy troops since the beginning of the war.

Big Saturn and Little Saturn

In addition to Operation Uranus, the Soviet General Staff developed another offensive operation, larger in scope and objectives. It was called "Saturn". CM. Shtemenko wrote: "According to the plan of the new front [South-Western], it was necessary to advance from the bridgehead on the right bank of the Don in the Serafimovich region and break out to Tatsinskaya, which would allow intercepting the enemy's railway and other routes from Stalingrad to the west. Then the front was to advance through Kamensk to the Rostov region, where the withdrawal routes of the German fascist troops would cross not only from Stalingrad, but also from the Caucasus ... When finalizing the general plan of the counteroffensive of our troops

the idea of a strike on Rostov via Kamensk found expression in the Stavka plan, known under the code name "Saturn". The shock groupings of troops surrounding the enemy were reinforced by tank and mechanized corps. The situation for the operation "Saturn" was very favorable. The

concentration of the main forces of Army Group "B" near Stalingrad led to the fact that the Germans lost the opportunity to create a continuous line of defense against the Soviet troops. Moreover, the Soviet command became aware that as a result of the successful implementation of the Stalingrad offensive operation in the Likhaya-Rostov sector, a huge gap had formed that was not filled by any German units. The absence of reserves in the direct operational rear of the enemy is an additional advantage for the Soviet troops.

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On November 23, the Supreme Commander-in-Chief ordered the representative of the Headquarters on the South-Western Front, AM Vasilevsky, to begin preparations for Operation Saturn. It was to be carried out by the troops of the left wing of the Voronezh and Southwestern fronts by striking in the direction of Millerovo - Rostov. It was assumed that the success of this operation could create conditions for the complete defeat of the entire southern enemy grouping on the Soviet German front. At the same time, not only the Paulus army, but also the 1st and 4th tank, 11th German armies, 3rd and 4th Romanian, 2nd Hungarian and 8th Italian armies turned out to be in the boiler. In fact, it was about achieving a decisive victory over the armed forces of Germany and a radical change in the course of World War II. It was already planned to inflict a catastrophic defeat on Hitler during the winter campaign of 1942-1943.

To accomplish this most important task, the Headquarters concentrated significant forces on the Voronezh and Southwestern fronts. In addition to the 1st Guards, 5th Tank, 6th and 21st Armies, 4th and 26th Tank Corps already there, the Southwestern Front additionally received 5 rifle divisions from the Stavka reserve, 18th, 24th and 25th tank and 1st guards mechanized corps, 6 separate tank and 16 artillery and mortar regiments. The Voronezh Front was given 3 rifle divisions, one rifle brigade, the 17th tank corps, 7 artillery and

mortar regiments. But that was not all. By decision of the Stavka on November 26, the 3rd Guards Army was created for the Southwestern Front under the command of Lieutenant General D.D. Lelyushenko. By December 9, it was planned to form and deploy between the 5th Tank Army and the 51st Army of the Stalingrad Front another, the 5th Shock Army, consisting of 5 rifle divisions, the 7th Tank and 4th Mechanized Corps. Lieutenant General M.M. was appointed to command the new army. Popov. In addition, the 2nd Guards Army was moving into the battle area from the Stavka reserve. True, because of the latter, a dispute arose between the commanders of the fronts. This army was also desired by the commander of the Stalingrad Front, A.I. Eremenko, and the commander of the Don Front K.K. Rokossovsky.

However, the available forces were more than enough. The troops of the Southwestern and Voronezh fronts were opposed only by the German task force "Gollidt", whose armored power was exhausted by the 7th and 11th tank divisions, as well as the 8th Italian army. As a combat-ready formation, it could not be taken into account at all. Further, up to Millerov, the enemy troops were absent. Yes, and the Fretter-Pico task force located in Millerovo had more than modest forces - the 30th Army Corps, the 3rd Mountain Rifle and the 304th Infantry Divisions. It did not represent a serious obstacle for the Soviet tank avalanche. The Germans could not put up anything to defend Rostov, except for scattered parts of the garrison. Thus, as Manstein accurately noted in his memoirs, the German High Command did everything to ensure that the Russian plan to eliminate the largest striking force of the German army succeeded.

However, at this crucial moment, the Soviet command began to make one mistake after another. First of all, according to AM Vasilevsky, the General Staff seriously miscalculated in assessing the number of German troops surrounded in Stalingrad. Prior to the offensive operation, it was believed that 85-90 thousand enemy soldiers and officers would be surrounded. But suddenly it turned out that the true figure is almost 350 thousand people. The "ghost of Demyansk" immediately appeared at the Headquarters, heavily pressing on the consciousness of both the Supreme Commander and his

marshals. This pressure was intensified by the presence of the German army groups "Don" and "Gollidt" at a slight distance from the boiler. Moreover, the latter was only 40 kilometers from the encircled group.

On November 26, in a conversation with A.M. Vasilevsky, by direct wire, Stalin stated that "at the present time, the most important and main task is the quickest liquidation of the encircled group of Germans." This, they say, will free our troops occupied in it to carry out other tasks for the final defeat of the enemy on the southern wing of the Soviet-German front. That is, on that day, for the first time at such a high level, an opinion was expressed about the need to postpone Operation Saturn indefinitely.

On November 29, the representative of the Headquarters on the Stalingrad front, G.K. Zhukov sent a telegram to Stalin. It contained proposals on the course of further military operations: "The German command, apparently, will try ... to assemble a strike group in the Nizhne-Chirskaya-Kotelnikovo region as soon as possible to break through the front of our troops in the general direction of Karpovka ... In order to prevent the connection of the Nizhne-Chirskaya - Kotelnikovo and Kotelnikovskaya enemy groupings from Stalingrad and the formation of a corridor, it is necessary:

- as quickly as possible to throw back the Nizhne-Chirskaya and Kotelnikovskaya groupings and create a dense battle order on the Oblivskaya-Tormosin-Kotelnikovo line. In the Nizhne Chirskaya-Kotelnikovo area, keep two groups of tanks as a reserve; - break the encircled enemy group near

Stalingrad into two parts. For what ... inflict a cleaving blow in the direction of Bol. Rossoshka. To meet him, strike in the direction of Dubininsky, height 135. In all other sectors, go on the defensive ... After splitting the encircled enemy group into two parts, you need to ... first of all destroy the weaker group, and then hit the group in the Stalingrad area with all your might.

No. 02. 29.11.42 Zhukov.

[133]

Further G.K. Zhukov writes that AM Vasilevsky agreed with his considerations and therefore decided to "temporarily abandon" the operation.

"Saturn". Instead of an attack on Rostov, the South-Western Front was redirected to strike at the flank of the enemy's Tormosino grouping. From that day on, the previous plan of the operation was divided in two: the operation "Big Saturn", which provided for the encirclement of the entire southern wing of the German troops, was postponed, it was replaced by the operation "Small Saturn", which turned the main forces of the Southwestern Front south, in the direction Morozovsk. Stalin, following his favorite principle "not to indulge in dizziness from success", approved the proposals of comrades Zhukov and Vasilevsky. It is interesting that at the same time, for

some reason, the Headquarters remained confident in the threat from the Lower Chir grouping of the enemy. Meanwhile, General Gollidt, only in a complete eclipse of reason, could decide to go on the offensive with his frail forces and thereby expose himself to the crushing blow of the many times superior troops of the Southwestern Front. He did nothing of the sort. On the contrary, in pursuance of the proposals of G.K. Zhukov, the 5th Panzer Army went on the offensive on Nizhne Chirskaya. Since there was a well-prepared German defense here, then, as AM Vasilevsky noted: "On the left flank of the Southwestern Front of the 5th Panzer Army, despite all efforts, it was not possible to dislodge the enemy from the bridgehead on the left bank of the Don, near the Nizhne-Chirskaya, as well as to eliminate its foothold on the eastern bank of the Chir. It kept bothering us." [134] And this concern was not in vain, since the attacks of the Soviet troops did not prevent General Gollidt from preparing his 7th and 11th troops to help Manstein.

th Panzer divisions.

Manstein himself considered the idea of releasing the 6th Army a complete hopelessness. Indeed, according to Hitler's instructions, the meaning of this operation was to hold Stalingrad. Manstein, on the other hand, proposed a different plan: "Leaving the territory occupied during the summer campaign [which could not be held anyway], it would be possible to use a severe crisis for victory! To do this, it was necessary to withdraw the troops of Army Groups A and Don in an organized manner from the arc of the front protruding far to the east beyond the lower Dnieper.

At the same time, it would be necessary to concentrate in the Kharkov region all the forces available to the command, released

as a result of the reduction of the front line. This grouping would receive the task of hitting the flank of enemy forces striving for crossings across the Dnieper. Thus, a transition would have been made from a retreat to a bypass operation, in which the German troops would have pursued the goal of pressing the enemy to the sea and destroying him there .
“But,” added Manstein, “it was not in Hitler’s nature to accept a decision that required the abandonment of the gains of the summer campaign.”

As for the idea of dissecting the Paulus group, it had one significant flaw. As you know, powerful defensive belts were created around Stalingrad and in the city itself in the summer of 1942. The Germans broke off all their teeth, breaking through them for four months. Now Paulus used these fortifications to organize a solid defense inside the ring. And the Soviet troops attacked them. What came out of this can be found in the memoirs of AM Vasilevsky: “Meeting the stubborn resistance of the encircled enemy, the Soviet troops were forced to stop the advance ... Following the instructions of the Headquarters, we again tried to dismember and destroy the encircled group in the first days of December. However, this time too, no significant results were achieved. The enemy, relying on a network of well-prepared engineering defensive structures, fiercely resisted, responding with fierce counterattacks to each of our

an attempt to advance”[136] .

In addition, in the best traditions of the Demyansk boiler, the Soviet command did not interfere with the Germans to establish an “air bridge”. A.M. Vasilevsky recalled that “we underestimated the seriousness of this task, and its implementation was random, scattered”[137] . The debate over—

Operation Saturn continued for another two weeks. By that time, the troops of the Stalingrad and Don fronts were finally bogged down in battles with the Paulus group. On December 12, Manstein launched an offensive from the Kotelnikovo area, causing a surge of gloomy mood in the Headquarters. Therefore, on December 14, the final decision was made: to change the direction of the main attack of the South-Western and left wing of the Voronezh fronts. Instead of Rostov, to the rear of the entire enemy grouping on the southern wing

the Soviet-German front, now the task was to defeat only the 8th Italian army and reach the rear of Manstein's troops. This was the "Little

Saturn". However, the task assigned to the Soviet troops according to the plan of operation "Little Saturn" failed to be completed. Having been defeated in an attempt to release the 6th Army, Manstein noticed a threat from the troops of the Southwestern Front and withdrew his grouping from a flank attack. It is interesting that AM Vasilevsky considered this a major victory for us: "As a result of the offensive of the Stalingrad Front from December 24 to December 31, the 4th Romanian army was finally defeated, and the enemy's 57th tank corps was driven back 150 kilometers with heavy losses"[138] . As for the strike of the Southwestern Front, its troops got stuck on the Tatsinskaya-Morozovsk line and did not reach Manstein. Two and a half months later, the 57th Tank Corps, along with other parts of Manstein, took an active part in the devastating battle for Kharkov for the Red Army.

These were all the fruits of the "Little Saturn". Why did the Soviet command refuse to conduct Operation Saturn and shelve the final defeat of Nazi Germany? AM Vasilevsky answers this question as follows: "The delay in the liquidation of Paulus' troops was the main reason that changed the operational situation in the Stalingrad and Middle Don areas and influenced the further development of Operation Saturn[139] . But such a delay was inevitable. In addition, Paulus was not going to leave anywhere. And the Soviet command knew about it. For example, G.K. Zhukov, in the telegram mentioned above to Stalin, reported: "The encircled German troops now, under the current situation, without an auxiliary strike from the Nizhne-Chirskaya-Kotelnikovo region, will not risk a breakthrough and exit from the encirclement"[140] . Gollidt did not plan any auxiliary strike. And with regard to Manstein, there was a reliable counterbalance - Operation Saturn. Here is the opinion of AM Vasilevsky: "Had the operation begun on December 10, it is quite possible to assume that the success achieved by the troops of the Southwestern and left wing of

offensive of Manstein's troops on December 12 in the direction of

Kotelnikovo"[141] . It must be said that Operation Saturn was so good that it could begin before December 10 and after December 16. Manstein is absolutely clear on this score: the main danger was not the loss of the 6th Army, but the fact that Army Group A could not quickly leave the Caucasus. A positional war was going on on the Transcaucasian front. This means that the Germans could not do without a stationary installation of weapons, that they had to accumulate ammunition and food, create various amenities for the troops, all the more necessary in the absence of reserves and the ability to change troops in positions. All of the above led to a loss of mobility and maneuverability, to a significant expenditure of time to prepare for withdrawal to new positions. Manstein recalled his conversation with the chief of staff of Army Group A, in which he called the start date for a possible retreat on January 2 and its completion only after 25 days. In addition, Hitler stubbornly rejected all proposals with the word

"retreat", thereby playing into the hands of his opponent. The rejection of Operation Saturn was the biggest mistake of the Soviet command in the entire war. Let's say more: an unforgivable mistake.

How could this operation be carried out? The ideal option was to simultaneously conduct operations "Uranus" and "Saturn". At the same time, the main thing was that absolute surprise was achieved. There were enough forces. The blow of the Stalingrad and Don fronts had the functions of an auxiliary, and the Voronezh and South-Western fronts - the main one. Actually, this was what the Headquarters and the General

Staff assumed before they found out the real size of the Paulus group. The main blow fell on the 8th Italian army, which, as you know, immediately ran. Further, it remained only to develop the breakthrough with mobile tank mechanized and cavalry groups specially created for this purpose. It was possible to secure the flank from a possible counterattack from the Gollidt group by rapidly reaching its flank and even the rear through the positions of

Manstein recalled: "Due to the collapse of the Italian army and the flight of almost all the Romanian troops on the left flank of the Gollidt group, the enemy could advance in the direction of the Donets crossings at Belaya Kalitva, Kamensk and Voroshilovgrad, encountering almost no resistance. Only in the Millerovo area, like a lone island in the red surf, did the Fretter-Pico group, newly created on the right flank of Army Group B, offer resistance. But still, the enemy had the opportunity, at his discretion, to turn east to strike at the rear of the Gollidt group or the Mith group, or continue to advance south, towards

Rostov" [142].

So, all the concerns expressed by G.K. Zhukov in a telegram dated November 29, Operation Saturn filmed. The breakthrough would have been so swift that Gollidt and Manstein did not even have time to think about the concentration of their forces, since they would already have Soviet troops in the rear. We add that in November there was no Fretter-Pico group and the road to Rostov remained free. The Germans, as they say, would not have had time to gasp, as Lelyushenko's tanks would already be in Rostov and slammed a trap unprecedented in military history.

Of course, the enemy would have made an attempt to break out of the ring. But what were his opportunities in this regard? First of all, all the fears of the Soviet command regarding the army of Paulus were groundless. General Paulus, firstly, did not have a corresponding order from Hitler. And secondly, the cessation of the supply of fuel turned the equipment of the 6th Army into a pile of dead metal. Paulus reported to the Fuhrer's Headquarters that for his tanks, of which about 100 more were ready for battle, there was fuel for no more than 30 kilometers. In order to ensure a breakthrough, it was necessary to transfer 4,000 tons of gasoline over the "air bridge". Of course, it was impossible. It was precisely this argument that Hitler invariably used in disputes with Manstein, who insisted on the immediate withdrawal of the 6th Army from Stalingrad: "What do you actually want, because Paulus has only enough fuel for 20 or at best 30 kilometers; after all, he himself reports that at the present time he cannot make a breakthrough at all. Thus, the opinion of the command of Army Group "B", on the one hand, was opposed by the opinion of the High Command, which, as a prerequisite for a breakthrough

put forward the retention by the 6th Army of the remaining sectors of the front near Stalingrad, and, on the other hand, the opinion of the army command, which considered a breakthrough impossible due to lack of fuel.

Communications passed through Rostov not only of the 6th Army, but also of the 4th Romanian and 4th Panzer Armies, of the entire Army Group A. Accordingly, not only Paulus was left without fuel. Meanwhile, the distance from the positions of Army Group A in the Caucasus to Rostov was at least 600 kilometers. The 4th Panzer Army, stationed south of Stalingrad, was separated from Rostov by 400 kilometers. The power reserve of the main German tank T-IV did not exceed 110 kilometers. So even without taking into account the opposition of the Soviet troops, all these German armies still would not have reached Rostov. They simply did not have sufficient fuel supplies to successfully break through. And no "air bridge" could save such a mass of troops.

But if there was a risk that the Germans would somehow reach Rostov, then it could have been prevented. Since there were almost no German troops at such a distance from the main theater of operations, the Red Army could move forward and seize the crossings across the Dnieper, which supplied the southern wing of the Wehrmacht. In this case, the breakthrough distance for the 4th Panzer Army was significantly extended and reached 700 kilometers, and for Army Group A - almost 900 kilometers. Obviously, the German troops were in a hopeless situation.

AM Vasilevsky claims that the Southwestern and Voronezh fronts in November 1942 were not ready for Operation Saturn. Then it should have begun, as he himself assumed, on December 10th. Or December 16, when it really began in the form of "Little Saturn". With such a course of action of the Red Army, the troops of Gollidt and Manstein would not have had time to slip out of the trap. The fact is that the distance from the positions of the 8th Italian army to Rostov was only 300 kilometers. Therefore, Soviet troops would advance with a lead of 100 kilometers. Thus, not only the capture of Rostov was achieved. In March 1943, the Germans would actually have nothing to carry out an offensive operation in the Kharkov area. Never in the history of our army would the shameful stain of another Kharkov defeat appear.

Finally, it is interesting to consider the potential for the collapse of the entire southern wing of the German Eastern Front. First of all, the loss of such a mass of troops could not be compensated for by anything. The Germans did not have such reserves. A gap almost 400 kilometers wide appeared in the front line. Again, there was nothing to close it. The Red Army, which, unlike the Wehrmacht, possessed significant reserves, could solve two problems: the defeat of Army Group Center by attacking the flank and rear and the development of a deep breakthrough in Ukraine, the liberation of Kiev, Donbass, Crimea without any special losses, access to the state border. In fact, it was about the complete defeat of Nazi Germany back in 1943. And the storming of Berlin would have taken place in the spring of forty-four. Soviet

history defines the Battle of Stalingrad as a turning point in the course of the war. In fact, it should be recognized that more than six months remained before the radical change. The loss of the troops of the Stalingrad group, of course, was a disaster, but not so severe as to really turn the tide of hostilities in favor of the Red Army and finally break the Wehrmacht both psychologically and militarily. After all, a little more than a month has passed since the surrender of Paulus, when the Soviet troops suffered a severe defeat in the battle for Kharkov and retreated under the onslaught of the enemy 150-200 kilometers to the east. All this, alas, does not speak in favor of the assertion of a radical change. The real turning point came after the Battle of

Kursk. Then the German army really suffered a final defeat and completely lost the initiative. But it could have happened much earlier. Manstein's words can serve as confirmation of this: "No matter how great the victory of the Soviet troops, they still failed to achieve a decisive victory - the destruction of the entire southern flank, which we could not compensate for in any way."

Chapter

9 The Second Battle for Kharkov

The Soviet command believed that the defeat of the Nazi troops in the region of Stalingrad, the Don and the Caucasus created favorable conditions for the deployment of an offensive on all fronts in the southwestern direction. Moreover, the Stavka set before the Red Army the task of seizing the strategic initiative and finally crushing the enemy. At the same time, confidence reigned in the Soviet headquarters that after the defeat at Stalingrad, the resistance force of the German army would decline and the enemy could be driven west without stopping. At first it seemed that it is.

On February 2, 1943, on the day of the surrender of the Paulus army, the troops of the Voronezh Front under the command of Colonel General F.I. Golikov began the Kharkov offensive operation. Its goal was to complete the defeat of the main forces of Army Group B in the Kharkov direction.

On the first day of the offensive, success was achieved. Having broken through the enemy defenses on the Oskol River, the Soviet command introduced into the gap made at the Stary Oskol - Novy Oskol - Valuiki line, the main shock group of the front as part of the 40th Army of General K.S. Moskalenko, 69th Army General M.I. Kazakov and the 3rd Panzer Army of General P.S. Rybalko. By the end of February 9, Soviet troops entered the Kharkov region. The 69th Army captured the regional center Volchansk. The

offensive of the troops of the right wing of the Southwestern Front, which began a week earlier, developed just as successfully. On January 30, at the junction of the 1st Guards and 6th armies, the mobile group of General M.M. Popov as part of the 4th Guards, 3rd, 10th and 18th Tank Corps. Troops of the 6th Army liberated Kupyansk, Lozovaya, Izyum, Balakleya and a number of other settlements in the Kharkov region. Finding a weakness in the enemy's defenses, the command of the Southwestern Front decided to develop the offensive in depth and, for this purpose, undertook a detour to the south.

Kharkov by the forces of the 6th Guards Cavalry Corps, General S.V. Sokolov. Moreover, with the liberation of Pavlograd by units of the 1st Guards Army, a gap formed in the German front. Soviet troops opened the road to Dnepropetrovsk and Zaporozhye.

The situation on the front of the Army Group "South" became so aggravated that on February 6 Hitler flew to Zaporozhye. The commander of the army group, Field Marshal Manstein, with a stone face, listened to the flow of reproaches from the Fuhrer. When Hitler finally fell silent, Manstein, in his characteristic cold-blooded manner, declared that the further the Russians advanced to the west and southwest, the better. Taking advantage of the fact that the Supreme Commander-in-Chief was dumbfounded by such a bold statement, the field marshal began to outline his plan of action. His arguments convinced Hitler. He approved the proposals made by the commander of the army group, which received the name "Manstein's operational plan."

Meanwhile, the troops of the Voronezh Front were rapidly approaching Kharkov. On the night of February 14, units of the 183rd and 340th rifle divisions broke through into the northwestern suburb of Alekseevka. A few hours later, the 25th Guards Rifle Division cut the Kharkiv-Poltava highway near Lyubotin. On the evening of February 14, troops of the 69th Army broke through to Kharkov. The 3rd Panzer Army engulfed the city from the east and southeast. By the morning of February 15, units of the 40th Army, in cooperation with the 5th Guards Tank Corps, captured the suburb of Zalyutino, drove the Germans out of the villages of Krasny Oktyabr and Pyatikhatki. The commander of the 1st SS Panzer Corps, Oberstgruppenführer Paul Gausser, who fought for Kharkov, clearly saw the threat of encirclement of his troops and on the night of February 16 decided to leave the city. His order was completely at odds with Hitler's categorical demands to hold Kharkov at all costs. The offensive

continued in the zone of the South-Western Front. Since the greatest success was outlined in the sector of the 6th Army, the Headquarters launched Operation Leap. Its purpose was to defeat the German group in the Donbass. Stalin put Lieutenant General N.F. Vatutin had the task of occupying Dnepropetrovsk, Zaporozhye and Sinelnikovo with units of the 6th Army in order to prevent the enemy from retreating beyond the Dnieper. At the same time, the Supreme

stressed: "Other tasks, such as advancing to Kremenchug, should not yet be given to the sixth army" SCAMO, f. 132-A, on.2642, d.34, l.37–38}. Therefore, on February 17, Vatutin sent the 1st Guards Tank Corps to Dnepropetrovsk and the 25th Tank Corps to Zaporozhye. According to the plan of Operation Leap, Popov's mobile group was to advance on Mariupol, clamping the German troops in pincers from the east. The Soviet command had no doubts about achieving decisive success. G.K. Zhukov wrote: "By mid-March 1943, the situation on all fronts had changed in favor of the Soviet Union. After the defeat of the German, Romanian, Italian and Hungarian troops in the region of the Volga, Don, North Caucasus, the enemy, suffering enormous losses, by mid-March withdrew to the Sumy-Akhtyrka-Krasnograd-

Slavyansk-Taganrog line. From the moment they launched a counteroffensive at Stalingrad [November 1942], until March 1943, the Soviet troops defeated more than 100 enemy divisions in total"[143] . 100 divisions is an impressive figure. This is no less than 30 percent of the German armed forces. But the impression is spoiled by the following lines: "... fierce battles were still going on in the sectors of the Voronezh, South-Western, Southern fronts and in the Kuban. In order to prevent further deterioration of the situation on the southern wing of the front of their troops, the German high command organized a counteroffensive ... "[144] . Therefore, the loss of more than 100 divisions not only did not prevent the Germans from fighting fiercely on an almost 700-kilometer front from the Kuban steppes to Sumy, but they also had the luxury of

organizing a counteroffensive. Being in the most real euphoria, the Soviet command completely discounted the presence of rather large enemy forces on their flanks. These were the same groups of Gollidt and Fretter-Pico, the 1st and 4th tank armies, allegedly defeated in the Don and the North Caucasus. Neither the Headquarters, nor its representatives, nor the commanders of the fronts for some reason took into account that the German troops firmly held the defense in the Krasnograd region and on the Kramatorsk-Krasnoarmeysk line. On February 19, Vatutin reported triumphantly to the Headquarters about the capture of Sinelnikov. Meanwhile,

in accordance with the "Manstein operational plan": the 1st SS Panzer Corps from the Krasnograd region aimed at the right flank of the 6th Army, the 48th Panzer Corps hung over its left flank in the Gulyaipole area, the 57th Panzer Corps prepared to strike at 1 1st Guards Army, 1st Tank Army - according to Popov's group. The situation was significantly aggravated by the fact that during the offensive battles, the Soviet troops suffered significant losses and the armies, corps, divisions had, at best, half of the staff. In addition, the considerable length of the front line created serious supply problems. Vasilevsky told AM about the difficult situation in which the Soviet troops found themselves as a result of poorly thought-out offensive operations: "Both the Stavka and the General Staff made the same mistake as the commanders of the Southwestern and Voronezh fronts: they did not expect the offensive actions of the enemy, considering him broken here. The headquarters not only agreed with the proposals of the commanders on the development of a further offensive, but in its directives even expanded the plans of the fronts. As a result, the South-Western Front continued to advance with battles in the western and south-western directions, every day increasing the width of the offensive front, which had already reached more than 400 kilometers by the beginning of the enemy counteroffensive. In addition, as a result of continuous battles, our troops suffered heavy losses in manpower and equipment and, due to their excessive distance from supply bases, experienced an acute shortage of ammunition. We add that, in fact, units of the 3rd Panzer, 69th, 6th Armies and Popov's group did not go on the offensive, but

German ticks. At

dawn on February 20, the 1st SS Panzer Corps and the 40th Panzer Corps of the 1st Panzer Army went on the offensive against the troops of the Southwestern Front. At the same time, General Vatutin considered that the purpose of the strike of the SS corps was to cover the retreat beyond the Dnieper of the main forces of Army Group South. Therefore, he ordered to continue the offensive on Zaporozhye and rejected the request of General Popov to withdraw the group's troops from the enemy's attack, pointing out to the alarmist that "this is contrary to the task assigned to

the group." On February 22, the 48th Panzer Corps delivered a counter attack from the Gulyai-Pole area to Pavlograd. The 6th Army, compressed from two sides, b

disorderly retreat. A.M. Vasilevsky described its consequences: "The enemy counterattack and the rapid withdrawal of the troops of the right wing of the Southwestern Front created a serious threat to the left wing of the Voronezh Front, whose troops were also extremely weakened in offensive battles, but still continued to advance in a westerly direction"[146]. Which just coincided with the most cherished the desires of the

enemy. On February 23, the 1st SS Panzer Corps joined in Pavlograd with the advanced units of the 48th Panzer Corps. A German armored trap slammed shut behind the backs of two Soviet tank corps advancing on Dnepropetrovsk and Zaporozhye. The mobile group of Popov also got it: the troops of General Gollidt surrounded the 7th Guards Cavalry Corps in the Debaltsevo area. There was no way to save these parts. On that day, the moment of truth came for General Vatutin. He understood Manstein's plan: to wait until all Soviet troops were drawn into the battle, left without reserves, and then strike. Therefore, the commander of the Southwestern Front turned to Headquarters with a proposal to immediately withdraw his units across the Seversky Donets River in order to organize a solid defense. But Stalin did not want to give up the prospect of capturing Zaporozhye and Dnepropetrovsk. Only on February 25, the Headquarters made a half-hearted decision: to withdraw only the right wing of the front across the river. The Germans readily

accepted Comrade Stalin's service. While he was hatching his decision, the German 40th Panzer Corps defeated the 18th Panzer Corps from Popov's group. Without the approval of the Headquarters, the group commander decided to withdraw the troops from the attack, ordering them to leave Krasnoarmeysk and Kramatorsk. Under the onslaught of the enemy, the withdrawal turned out to be somewhat erratic, as a result of which the 4th Guards Tank Corps was especially badly damaged. Nevertheless, Popov's troops managed to avoid encirclement. They managed to retreat behind the Seversky Donets, where on February 27 the appropriate permission from the Stavka was received. The next day, the German 17th Panzer Division tried to cross the river in the Balakleya area on the move, but it was thrown back to its original positions. By March 3, Vatutin's troops had completed their withdrawal. O

a strong front was formed at the turn of Balakleya - Krasny Liman. The offensive operations of the enemy in this area have ended.

The gap in the Krasnograd area mentioned above created a convenient opportunity for the Germans to strike at the 3rd Panzer Army on the flank. On February 28, three divisions of the 1st SS Panzer Corps were redirected to action against Rybalko's troops. With blows in converging directions, the SS tankers pinched the Soviet grouping in the triangle of Kegichevka - Krasnograd - the Berestovaya River. The 6th Guards Cavalry, 12th and 15th Tank Corps, 111th, 184th, 219th Rifle Divisions were surrounded. After the ring was closed, they received an order to withdraw. Nevertheless, the Soviet troops made a breakthrough in the direction of Taranovka and left the encirclement. But the losses incurred during the breakthrough excluded the further combat use of these units, and they were withdrawn to the rear. With the defeat of the 3rd Panzer Army, the Germans opened the way to Kharkov.

On March 4, the 1st and 2nd SS Panzer Divisions attacked in the Taranovka area, trying to reach Kharkov from the southeast. But the fighters of the 25th Guards Rifle Division, who occupied the defense here, stood to the death and did not let the enemy through. Then Manstein decided to resort to a tried and tested means - a maneuver. On his orders, the tank divisions "Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler" and "Dead Head" struck at the junction between the 3rd Panzer and 69th armies. Here the Germans expected quick success. The Leibstandarte captured Valki, the "Dead Head" - Olyians. During the day, the SS divisions widened the gap in the Soviet defense to 60 kilometers.

On March 10, a tank reconnaissance battalion, the 1st and 2nd motorized infantry regiments of the Leibstandarte broke into Kharkov. The SS division "Reich" with heavy fighting advanced towards the railway station. Tanks "Totenkopf" rounded Kharkov from the north and took Chuguev. The Soviet troops that made up the Kharkov garrison were surrounded: the 62nd guards, 19th and 303rd rifle divisions, the 17th rifle brigade of the NKVD, the 86th and 179th separate tank brigades. In addition, in the Bogodukhov area, three rifle divisions attached to the 69th Army from the 40th Army - the 107th, 183rd and 340th - fell into the cauldron. 40th Army, in which only the 5th Guards Tank Corps, 100th and 309th Rifles, battered in previous battles, remained

division, retreated in the direction of Belgorod under the onslaught of the grenadier motorized division "Grossdeutschland".

Fierce battles unfolded on the streets of Kharkov. Major General E.E., who commanded the encirclement. Belov took all measures to keep the city. The bloody struggle continued for four days. On the morning of March 15, General Rybalko gave Belov the order to leave the encirclement. By that time, the troops of the Kharkov garrison were cut by the enemy into two isolated parts. Therefore, General Belov ordered the commander of the second group, Colonel F.N. Rudkin to break through on his own. As a cover for the outgoing troops, the 62nd Guards Rifle Division, Major General G.M. Zaitsev. On the evening of March 15, units of Belov and Rudkin went on a breakthrough. Suffering heavy

losses, they fought for 30 kilometers, crossed the Seversky Donets and joined the troops of the South-Western Front.

Since everywhere the Red Army managed to retreat across the river, the continuation of the German offensive was possible only on Belgorod. Arriving at the Voronezh Front, the representative of the Stavka G.K. Zhukov assessed the situation as follows: "After the capture of Kharkov, enemy units advanced without much resistance in the Belgorod direction and occupied Cossack Lopan"[147] . They took Belgorod on March 18. But they couldn't go any further. Manstein, in his memoirs, explained this by the onset of thaw, Zhukov - by the approach of the Headquarters reserves. The Stalingrad

euphoria cost the Soviet command dearly. At Headquarters, they believed that all the teeth of the Germans had been knocked out, and unexpectedly, unexpectedly, they fell into the wide-open mouth of the enemy with armored fangs that retained their former sharpness. As a result, the initiative was lost indefinitely. A situation of extremely dangerous balance of power has been created. Instead of an offensive, the Red Army had to take up shovels and create a defense in depth on the Kursk Bulge.

A look without rose-colored glasses

Let us repeat the extremely important thought of AM Vasilevsky again: both the Headquarters, and the General Staff, and the commanders

The Voronezh and Southwestern fronts made a common mistake, not expecting offensive operations of the enemy and considering it defeated. There is a good expression in Russian about this: "Look through rose-colored glasses." But how many times over the past two years of the war did the Germans do what Manstein suggested in his operational plan - to catch the Soviet troops in a bag with a blow to the flanks! Suffice it to recall, for example, the tragedy of the 2nd Shock Army of the Volkhov Front. And many more such examples can be found.

Generals Vatutin and Golikov came to the positions of front commanders from the General Staff. Working there in 1941-1942, they studied the sad experience of a number of offensive operations that ended in brutal failures. In most cases, the enemy acted according to the same scheme as in March 1943 near Kharkov. It is very difficult to explain why the commanders, who had a solid experience of General Staff officers, did not pay attention to the German groups hanging over the flanks of their fronts. Moreover, these groupings consisted mainly of tank and motorized infantry units, specially designed for shock functions. One can only assume that both commanders were too carried away by the pursuit of the retreating enemy, entered into a dangerous excitement. But then why didn't the General Staff warn them about a possible flank threat? After all, every German division was registered in the Operations Directorate, and they knew for sure that the 40th, 48th and 57th German tank corps had not been defeated. That a fresh SS tank corps arrived in the Kharkov region. That the German 1st Panzer Army, although it suffered losses, is still quite combat-ready. But the General Staff acted in the exact opposite way, that is, it played along with the hatred moods in the front and army headquarters. Meanwhile, an unbiased assessment of the situation, a look at the map of hostilities without rose-colored glasses could

suggest other, more advantageous decisions from an operational point of view. The officers of the General Staff, who developed plans for the Headquarters, had the opportunity to ask, for example, the following question: "Why should we attack in the direction where the main forces of the enemy are concentrated?" Yes, Stalingrad was our great victory, but the Germans are still strong. He stubbornly clings to every piece of land. It's hard to get him out of there.

In the Army Group "South", in the regions of Kharkov and Donbass, there are almost 5 tank corps, including one full-blooded SS. To attack them means to put your troops in conditions of inevitable high losses and depletion of reserves. How far they can advance with such losses is a big question.

But on the left flank of the enemy, the alignment of forces is completely different. There are no German tanks here. The defense is held by a rather weak 2nd Army with the remnants of Italian troops, the price of which we already know. In addition, there are two circumstances that are very favorable for us and problematic for the enemy. Firstly, the 2nd Army is located at the junction with the front of Army Group Center. Consequently, there is a weak point in the enemy's defense. Secondly, the front of the 2nd Army is stretched along the Sevsk-Rylsk-Sumy-Akhtyrka line. And there are no reserves in its operational rear. The impact of the entire mass of our troops will

inevitably lead to a deep breakthrough. What are the goals of such an offensive operation? First of all, Kyiv. Capital of Ukraine. Mother of Russian cities. His release will cause a huge resonance both in our country and in the world. And from Sumy to Kyiv is within easy reach. Only 350 kilometers. The speed of the T-34/85 on the highway is 50 kilometers per hour. Taking into account the weakness of the potential resistance of the enemy, our "thirty-fours" will reach

Kyiv in 4-5 days. And no one can stop them! It should be emphasized that both the Fuhrer's Headquarters and the headquarters of Army Group South were very much afraid of the possibility of a Soviet attack on Kyiv. Here is what Manstein wrote about this: "If the enemy dared to go to Kiev, as evidenced by some signs [and what Hitler was most afraid of], then we could only wish him a happy journey"[148] .

Simply put, the Germans would not have been able to fend off the blow in the direction

Of course, for the Soviet troops advancing on Kyiv, there was a threat of a flank attack from the main forces of Army Group South. But how quickly could the Germans make the right decision? And how long would it take to transfer and concentrate troops? To hold Kyiv, Hitler had to either completely leave the Donbass, or seriously weaken the grouping there. But he did not want to part with either the Donbass or Kharkov. And the situation demanded something to sacrifice. Practice

shows that such decisions were given to Hitler very hard. While he would have been in painful thoughts, Soviet tanks would already be in Kyiv. But even if the Fuhrer had made a quick decision, the Germans would not have had time to concentrate their tank corps in time for such an operation. Recall that the concentration in the immediate vicinity of the theater of operations took them four days. In the event of a threat to Kyiv, the only thing they could really do was to throw their corps into battle in parts, as they arrived. Consequently, a concentric strike did not threaten the Soviet troops. However, it was possible to exclude such a blow

altogether. When thrown at Kyiv, our troops could threaten not only the flank, but also the rear of the main forces of Army Group South concentrated in Kharkov and Donbass. And our superiority in manpower and equipment over the Germans was at least threefold [Manstein claims that the troops of the Voronezh, Southwestern and Southern fronts outnumbered Army Group South by a ratio of 7:1]. Therefore, nothing prevented the Red Army from inflicting a powerful preemptive strike on the enemy, like that envisaged by Operation Leap. With the difference that in this case our troops would not have suffered such significant losses as they did during the frontal assaults on the German fortifications near Kharkov, Krasnograd, Krasnoarmeysk, Kramatorsk, Debaltsevo. And the development of the "Manstein operational plan" would be impossible in principle. With such a development of events, the best solution for the Germans was a speedy retreat beyond the Dnieper.

However, Operation Leap was what it was. Let it be. But if the purpose of this operation was to pincer the main forces of Army Group South, then its execution should have implied the concentration of our respective forces. Meanwhile, such an important task as cutting off the entire mass of German troops from crossings across the Dnieper, intercepting their communications, could not be solved by two tank corps weakened in previous battles, which, moreover, were advancing in divergent directions, without communication and interaction with each other. How seriously the Germans took this threat can be judged from the testimony of Manstein: "The 4th Panzer Army had to quickly defeat the enemy in the gap between the 1st Panzer Army and the Kempf group and

thereby preventing the army group from being cut off from crossings across the Dnieper. Otherwise, due to lack of fuel, the bulk of the forces would soon become incapable of movement. Indeed, the plan for Operation Leap

was very good, but for its successful implementation, a sufficient number of troops had to be allocated. For example, Popov's mobile group, which was tasked with capturing Mariupol, that is, passing through the German defensive orders for almost 300 kilometers, was opposed by two German tank corps. As a result, Popov's troops were already stuck on the Krasnoarmeysk-Kramatorsk line and did not come close to fulfilling their combat mission. And they bled to death in positional battles against a well-organized enemy defense and then were defeated during his counteroffensive.

Of course, the task of encircling the main forces of Army Group South was the main one, but at the same time, the Stavka also demanded the capture of Kharkov and the development of an offensive against Poltava. Thus, for the hundredth time, the Soviet command embarked on the vicious path of dispersing its forces, which nullified the numerical advantage over the enemy, allowed him to maneuver, concentrate strike groups first on one sector of the front, then on another, and smash our advancing troops one by one.

It was possible to avoid defeat in Operation Leap by refusing to conduct parallel offensive operations. This is the first condition. And the second is to secure the flanks. Moreover, when calculating forces, it was necessary to proceed from the fact that the main danger threatens by no means the shock group, which will advance on Dnepropetrovsk and Zaporozhye. In such a situation, the most optimal solution for the enemy is to close the gap through which the Soviet troops advance. So, there you have to wait for the blow. The best course of action could

suggest the experience of defensive battles near Kotelnikov. Or the bitter experience of the 2nd shock. On threatening directions it was necessary to prepare a solid defense. After all, there was a good example of defensive actions - the defense of Taranovka by units of the 25th Guards Rifle Division. But the temporary refusal to storm Kharkov and other operations of this kind released forces sufficient to eliminate the threat of a breakthrough

enemy to Pavlograd. Let the Germans break their foreheads, trying to break through our defenses. Let them throw their forces into the wind, of which they already do not have a lot.

Manstein, like Guderian, did not like protracted positional battles. He invariably tried to get away from such actions, which promised nothing but unnecessary losses. Convinced of the strength of the enemy's defense, Manstein would probably have ordered the attacks to be stopped and would have begun to look for a new, more optimal solution. But in this case, he didn't have much of a choice. Only closing the gap between the Kempf group and the 1st Panzer Army made it possible to solve the problem of neutralizing the Russian breakthrough to the Dnieper. If the capture of Pavlograd did not take place, then it was necessary either to deploy tanks to attack the advancing Russian grouping, which in itself was very problematic, or to withdraw all their troops behind the Dnieper as soon as possible. With Russian cavalry and tank corps hanging on their shoulders, such a withdrawal could not be a particularly pleasant thing either. In general, the German commander was faced with the need to make two equally serious decisions. Needless to say, in such a situation, there was no need to think about any offensive and the capture of Belgorod. And this allowed the Red Army to liberate the Donbass, Kharkov, Dnepropetrovsk, Zaporozhye, Poltava without any

problems. However, the failure of the Leap operation did not yet mean such a large-scale defeat, which the Soviet troops actually suffered. At that time, only two tank corps were in the boiler. And in total, there were about twenty of them in the troops of the Voronezh and South-Western fronts. The purpose of the offensive operation undertaken by the Germans was more significant. Manstein wrote: "Our goal was not to capture Kharkov, but to defeat and, if possible, destroy enemy units stationed there. The immediate goal, therefore, was the defeat of the southern flank of the enemy, located on Berestovaya southwest of Kharkov, on which the 3rd Soviet tank army was operating. Could the Soviet command unravel the enemy's plan and take some measures?— The German offensive took only the Southwestern Front by surprise. But Manstein failed to

completely defeat him. Although with

belatedly, the front commander nevertheless decided to withdraw his troops from the blow. But on his neighbor, Colonel-General F.I. Golikov, the German blow struck only eight days later. Therefore, there can be no talk of any suddenness. But even if the commander of the Voronezh Front thought that the Germans would not take advantage of the gap on his left flank, which was very convenient for a strike, he still had time to get out of the attack. The intentions of the Germans became apparent after the attempt of the SS Panzer Corps to storm Taranovka. The heroic actions of the 25th Guards breakthrough were prevented. Further, Golikov could only report to the Headquarters: "Comrade Stalin, the enemy intends to encircle my troops in the Kharkov region. In order to avoid serious consequences, I ask permission to withdraw across the Seversky Donets River. Having saved my troops, I will be able to take Kharkov again in a month and a half. As you know, on February 27, the Headquarters

authorized the retreat of the troops of the Southwestern Front beyond the Seversky Donets. The pogrom organized by the Germans had already had a sobering effect both on Stalin and on all members of the Headquarters. Moscow really did not want a repetition of the same scenario also on the Voronezh front. But Golikov at first unacceptably hesitated to order the withdrawal of units of the 3rd Panzer Army from Berestovaya, and then similarly set up his troops in Bogodukhov and Kharkov for defeat.

The timely retreat of the Voronezh and South-Western fronts behind the Seversky Donets meant the failure of the "Manstein operational plan". From the intention to storm the Soviet positions across the river, he refused. The preservation of the main forces of the fronts would make it possible to stop the German offensive on Belgorod with a strong counterattack to the flank or by transferring a sufficient number of troops there to organize a solid defense. And the Headquarters would not have to use strategic

reserves. However, there is no evil without good. After the defeat near Kharkov, the assessment of the situation by the Soviet command again became real. It was this that made it possible to prepare the Battle of Kursk at the highest professional level, inflict a final defeat on the German army and forever turn the tide of the Great Patriotic War.

Chapter

10 Zhitomir tank battle

In October 1943, the entire Left-bank Ukraine was cleared of Nazi troops. By decision of the Headquarters, on October 20, 1943, the Voronezh Front was renamed the 1st Ukrainian Front, the Steppe Front - the 2nd Ukrainian. While pursuing a rapidly retreating enemy, Soviet troops managed to capture a number of bridgeheads on the right bank of the Dnieper. Thus, favorable conditions were created for the development of a further offensive.

The Stavka considered the liberation of Kyiv a priority. The General Staff developed a plan for an offensive operation with the aim of defeating the Kyiv grouping of the enemy and the subsequent breakthrough into the operational depth to Korosten - Zhytomyr - Fastov. According to the plan of the Soviet command, the main blow was to be delivered north of Kyiv, from the Lutezh bridgehead. Initially, it was planned to inflict it from the Bukrin bridgehead, but since the Germans were expecting the start of our offensive from here and pulled their main forces to the Veliky Bukrin area, the center of gravity was shifted to Lyutezh. To concentrate a sufficient number of troops on the Lutezhsky bridgehead, an unprecedented measure had to be taken. Concentrated on the Bukrinsky bridgehead, the 3rd Guards Tank Army and the 7th Artillery Breakthrough Corps, right under the nose of the enemy, made a hidden two hundred-kilometer march along the banks of the Dnieper and redeployed to the Lyutezh area. Such a large-scale transfer of troops was kept secret from the German command. By November 1, the 38th Army, the 3rd Guards Tank Army, the 5th Guards Tank Corps, the 7th Artillery Breakthrough Corps and other units were concentrated on the Lutezh bridgehead. In addition, the 27th and 40th armies of the 1st Ukrainian Front were to take diversionary actions on the Bukrinsky bridgehead in order to pin down the enemy.

On November 1, Soviet troops went on the offensive in the Veliky Bukrin area. The German command was brought into

delusion regarding the true intentions of the front commander N.F. Vatutin. Therefore, the blow delivered on November 3 from the Lyutezh bridgehead took the enemy by surprise. The 13th and 49th German army corps concentrated here were knocked down from their positions and began to retreat randomly. But still, the course of the offensive operation was not as successful as General of the Army Vatutin would like. On the near approaches to Kyiv, the 7th army corps of the enemy put up fierce resistance to the troops of the 38th army. Therefore, its advance has noticeably slowed down. In order to decisively influence the course of the operation, the front commander threw the 3rd Guards Tank Army of General P.S. Rybalko. The tankers were given the task of cutting the German front in the Dnieper salient and penetrating far into the operational rear of Army Group South.

As soon as Soviet tanks cut the Kyiv-Zhitomir highway, the German 7th Army Corps immediately left the city under the threat of encirclement. By the end of November 5, the 38th Army and the 5th Guards Tank Corps had completely captured Kiev. General rejoicing was intensified by the fact that the capital of Ukraine was liberated on the eve of the "red date" on November 7th.

As a result of the offensive from the Lyutezh bridgehead, Soviet troops tore the enemy's front into three parts: the 49th Army Corps retreated in the direction of Korosten, the 13th in the direction of Zhitomir, and the 7th to the west of Fastov. Only by transferring the 10th Motorized Division from the 8th Army to this sector did the Germans manage to temporarily stabilize the front in the southern direction.

The Soviet offensive posed a huge danger to the entire German grouping located in the Dnieper salient. Korosten, Zhitomir and Fastov, as major railway junctions, provided a communications system not only for Army Group South, but also for Army Group Center. And in aggravation of the current critical situation, the commander of the German troops in Ukraine, Field Marshal Manstein, suddenly gave the order to leave Chernyakhov and Zhytomyr without a fight. On November 12, both of these settlements were occupied by Soviet troops.

At first glance, Manstein acted absolutely illogically, allowing the enemy to move further to the west and thereby

opening up the rear of the 8th and 6th armies for a strike. But in reality it was a maneuver that was part of another operational plan. Assessing the situation with his usual composure, Manstein noticed that the Soviet generals were again in the heat of the chase and their advancing troops had lost their compactness. Thus, they unwittingly drove themselves into a trap.

Manstein recalled: "Both corps, stationed on the Dnieper north of Kyiv, were thrown back far to the east, to Zhitomir and Korosten. Both of these important railway junctions, through which communication was carried out with the Army Group Center, as well as the supply of the tank army, were occupied by the enemy. The 4th

Panzer Army was thus divided into three far groups separated from each other.

The only light in this critical situation was that the enemy now also split his forces, acting in two directions - southern and western. At the same time, the enemy forces advancing to the west could not achieve decisive success until they managed to turn south to deeply envelop the army group. To prevent such a turnaround, Manstein slipped a large bait in the form of Zhitomir to the 3rd Guards Tank and 60th Armies advancing in the western direction.

It should be noted here that in the third year of the war, the German military leaders knew well the Achilles' heel of their enemy. There was rivalry among Soviet commanders for the capture of major cities. From the beginning of the war, the liberated settlements were the leitmotif of the work of the Sovinformburo, and the estimated indicators of the combat operations of the fronts, armies, corps, and divisions were formed accordingly. Therefore, the Soviet commanders paid such great attention to the mastery of the territory and settlements. And often to the detriment of the cause. Say, one of the main reasons for the death of the same 2nd shock or 33rd army of the Western Front was the unwillingness of the command to give up the conquered territories. And the defeat near Kharkov in March 1943 was a classic case: in order to seize the territory, the Soviet command dispersed its forces in a number of directions, and as a result, our troops were under attack.

A similar situation developed in the Zhytomyr region. As of November 12, 1943, the troops of the 1st Ukrainian Front had the following operational configuration: Chernobyl - Malin - Zhitomir - Fastov. Thus, the front line was an arc, strongly elongated in a westerly direction. But unlike the Kursk Bulge, the Zhitomir Bulge did not have a strong defense. On the flanks - in the areas of Korosten and Fastov - the Germans held back the Soviet troops, without interfering with their advance in the center.

Between November 3 and 13, the Germans quickly carried out covert regrouping. By that time, it was completely clear that decisive events were taking place in the Zhytomyr direction. Therefore, Manstein did not hesitate to take the risk, withdrawing all tank and part of the infantry divisions from the 8th Army. At the headquarters of the 48th Panzer Corps, a counteroffensive plan was developed. The task of defeating the Zhitomir grouping of Soviet troops was taken on by two experienced tank commanders, Generals Balk and Mellentin. Manstein gave them all available tank forces: the 1st, 3rd, 10th, 25th tank divisions and the Leibstandarte. The 20th Motorized Infantry Division and the SS Reich Division, as well as the 8th and 10th Infantry Divisions, were involved in

the operation as support. As soon as the resistance of the German troops in the area west of Zhytomyr increased sharply, the commander of the 60th Army, General I.D. Chernyakhovsky ordered to suspend further offensive. Former commander of the 3rd Guards Light Artillery Brigade V.M. Zhagala recalled: "By November 12, breaking up the offensive in breadth and depth, our formations deeply wedged into the location of enemy troops. The Nazis left the cities of Zhytomyr and Chernyakhov almost without resistance. They seemed to be pulling us into a huge bag. Meanwhile, according to our intelligence, to the south and south-west of Zhytomyr, Fastov and Belaya Tserkov large enemy infantry and tank forces were — concentrated. The activity of its aviation has also increased"[152]. The former brigade commander wrote that "the insidious plans of the enemy were timely unraveled by our command." But judging by how further events developed, the

reaction of the Soviet command to them was still belated. On the morning of November 15, a German tank avalanche, supported by aviation,

Korostyshev, 26 kilometers east of Zhytomyr, in order to intercept the strategic highway and thereby cut off the main escape route for Soviet troops. The enemy offensive clearly took the 60th Army by surprise, since by the evening of November 16, Korostyshev was captured. The 1st Cavalry, 15th, 23rd, 30th Rifle Corps and the 3rd Guards Artillery Brigade ended up in the Zhytomyr cauldron.

However, General Chernyakhovsky did not lose his head. Anticipating the obligatory turn to the west of the German strike force in order to capture Zhytomyr, he ordered his guards artillery regiments to deploy about 5 kilometers west of Korostyshev, in the Gazinka-Kmitov-Kosharische area and block the highway on both sides. Thus, the Germans were forced to break through the powerful anti-tank defense of the Russians, which temporarily averted the threat of a complete defeat of the 60th Army. As the army commander foresaw, on the

morning of November 18, German tank mechanized units stumbled upon the defenses of the 3rd Guards Artillery Brigade and were drawn into its assault. The battle continued throughout the day. The Germans suffered significant losses, but made no progress. On the night of November 19, the brigade received an order to withdraw from their positions and cover the exit from the encirclement of the 1st Cavalry Corps southeast of Zhitomir. However, the main

events took place to the west of the city, in the zone of the 3rd Guards Tank Army. On the day the German offensive began, General Rybalko decided to launch a counterattack on the enemy. The commander of the 48th Panzer Corps, General Balk, immediately realized what a serious mistake the Russian commander had made. He called the commander of the Leibstandarte and ordered him to die, but to hold back the

onslaught of the enemy. The commander of the SS Panzer Division, Oberführer Wilhelm Mohncke, was one of those officers whose courage even Hitler admired. Bulk had no doubt that he would follow orders. For four days, the Leibstandarte fought off the attacks of Soviet tanks. Meanwhile, the 48th Panzer Corps outflanked Rybalko's army along the Zhytomyr-Kyiv highway and hit it in the rear. Manstein briefly noted in his memoirs: "On November 15, the 48th Panzer Corps began to deliver the intended blow, which led to the fact that moving from Kyiv to the southwest

the enemy's tank corps - the closest target of the strike - were defeated "[153] . —

As a result of the defeat of the 3rd Guards Tank Army, the Germans freed up forces to capture Zhitomir. The city was back in their hands. But now the German command set itself more ambitious tasks. Manstein considered that the situation made it possible to clear the entire right bank of the Dnieper from Soviet troops and recapture Kyiv. The Germans decided to continue the offensive.

Manstein's calculations were largely justified. But not so much that one could talk about achieving a complete victory. In the second half of November, the Red Army really lost the initiative and went over to the defensive. The German commander miscalculated only in assessing the combat capability of the 60th Army. Although Chernyakhovsky's troops suffered significant losses when leaving the encirclement, they retained the ability to resist. Therefore, the Germans advanced 35-40 kilometers and got stuck in the Soviet defense at the turn of Malin - Radomyshl - Fastov. V.M. Zhagala recalled: "Until December 25, 1943, the brigade was continuously thrown from one sector of the front to another, where it was necessary to repel the fierce attacks of enemy tank units and subunits. Making lightning marches, the light artillery brigade unexpectedly appeared in front of the enemy either near Korostyshev, or on the approaches to Radomyshl, Malin ... "[154] .

Manstein maneuvered and, having broken through the front in the Korosten region, again captured Kiev. But he failed to completely eliminate the Zhytomyr ledge. The troops of the 60th, 27th and 40th armies held out in an arc south of Kyiv and north of

Kanev. By the end of December 25, the German command decided to stop the attacks. Manstein understood that the enemy had enough reserves and there was a significant danger of a counteroffensive on his part. His premonition did not deceive him. While the troops of the Army Group "South" rushed to Kyiv, the Headquarters transferred significant reserve forces to the 1st Ukrainian Front. The 1st and 3rd Guards Tank, 1st Guards, 13th, 18th, 27th, 38th, 40th, and 60th Armies were concentrated to carry out the Zhytomyr-Berdichev offensive operation. The Soviet offensive, which began on December 29, drove Manstein's troops 200-250 kilometers to the west.

UNJUSTIFIED RISK

When developing a plan to defeat the 3rd Guards Tank Army near Zhitomir, Manstein did not come up with anything new. The Russians did not secure the flanks of their strike force, and that was enough. Nevertheless, the commander of Army Group South was well aware of the risks he was taking. The German troops had no reserves. The counter-offensive had to be organized according to the principle that the Russians express by the saying "trishkin caftan". After all, the length of the front of the Army Group "South" on the right bank of the Dnieper was 750 kilometers. And only 32 German divisions held it.

The Soviet troops had no problems with reserves. Suffice it to recall that just a month after the heaviest losses in the Zhytomyr cauldron, the 3rd Guards Tank Army was actually recreated anew. The Germans could not afford anything like this. Thus, Manstein's decision to pull all the available strike forces to the Zhitomir region, in the event of any unfavorable course of the operation, could lead to the collapse of the entire German front on the Dnieper. Therefore, the share of risk in his operational plan was disproportionately high. But, as Manstein himself noted in his memoirs, he had no choice. The Soviet command was in a much more advantageous position. First

of all, in terms of the strength of ownership of the initiative. The Germans had the opportunity to act, let's say, only "second number". There was nothing for them to think about somehow seizing the initiative. Soviet troops captured several bridgeheads, any of which could become a starting point for delivering a powerful blow. And the Germans had to stand and wait for such a blow to follow. Successfully carried out measures to mislead the enemy opened up additional operational prospects for

the Soviet command. During the offensive operation from the Lyutezh bridgehead, complete surprise was achieved. But then everything went awry: the troops of the 1st Ukrainian Front spread out in different, unrelated directions, dispersed their forces, and thereby nullified their

advantage over the enemy in manpower and technology. As a result, the Germans had the opportunity to maneuver with their small forces. Moreover, they seized the initiative and recaptured Kyiv from the Russians in mid-December. Moreover, the Soviet command could well have avoided such a development of the situation, not let go of the initiative and, through the correct use of the opened prospects, to defeat the main forces of Army Group South.

So, in early November 1943, the Soviet strike force made a deep breakthrough from the Lyutezh bridgehead. At the same time, the main enemy forces were in the other direction. They were moved to the Bukrinsky bridgehead and were drawn into battles with the 27th and 40th armies. Meanwhile, the 3rd Guards Tank and 60th Armies had already advanced 60-70 kilometers to the west. Thus, they created a threat to reach the flank and rear of Manstein's main grouping. By the way, the German commander clearly saw this threat: "The enemy forces advancing to the west could not achieve decisive success until they managed to turn south to deeply envelop the army group. The task of the two corps thrown back to the west was to prevent them from making this maneuver until the army group brought up reinforcements. Here it is appropriate to ask the question: how could two rather battered German army —

corps, moreover, retreating in divergent directions, prevent two Soviet armies, one of which was tank, from making a deep envelopment of Army Group South? This could happen only in one case - if the Soviet command did not pursue such a goal. Instead of a decisive defeat of the enemy troops, the Soviet headquarters set their sights on capturing Zhytomyr, and in addition to it, Korosten, Fastov and other large settlements.

Meanwhile, the decision to turn the entire strike force to the south instead of further advance towards Zhitomir would radically change the situation. The displacement of the 7th, 13th and 49th German army corps to the west was not of decisive importance. Rybalko and Chernyakhovsky could allocate one of their corps for their pursuit and then attack the rear of the main German group with all their might. Create for

Manstein luxury cauldron. Squeeze in the ring up to fifteen German divisions, mostly armored and motorized. Their defeat would mean the end of Army Group South. A huge gap would appear in the German front, which there was nothing to close. At the same time, conditions were created for even greater penetration into the depths of the enemy's defenses, for reaching the flank of Army Group Center. But even if some part of Manstein's troops managed to break out of the ring, then they could create a new front no less than 300-400 kilometers to the west. Which again created the danger of a flank attack for the German troops in Belarus. However, the Soviet command chose a different path. While they were being hit in

different directions, the Germans were concentrating forces in the Zhytomyr region. But a strike by the 3rd Guards Tank Army to the south could rule out such a possibility altogether. Manstein wrote that he was destined to endure many troubled days, until by mid-November he managed to transfer tank divisions near Zhitomir. Therefore, Rybalko and Chernyakhovsky had enough time to preempt the enemy and disrupt the counteroffensive he was planning. The choice was not limited to a blow to the south. Judging by the memoirs of V.M. Zhagala, Soviet intelligence revealed in advance

the regrouping carried out by the enemy. And it was carried out by weakening other areas. Consequently, the opportunity opened up to set a trap for the Germans by repeating the trick with the Lyutezh bridgehead. Manstein recalled: "To further strengthen the 4th Panzer Army, the Army Group transferred to it from the 8th Army 2 more tank [3 and 10]. and 2 motorized divisions[156] as well as the 10th and 8th

infantry divisions. It was clear that by doing so we were weakening the 8th Army beyond measure, but the army group was at that moment forced to significantly weaken the less-important sectors of the front and transfer their forces to the decisive sector. But this was clear not only to Manstein. Intelligence of the 1st Ukrainian Front detected the movement of enemy troops, and their picture became clear to the Soviet command. There was a successful experience of covert transfer of entire tank armies over considerable distances. All that was left was for them

take advantage.

Manstein considered Zhytomyr to be the decisive direction. He should have been strengthened in this opinion by all available means. It was possible to apply the method of creating false activity of troops or to create the appearance of the presence of large tank, cavalry, and infantry formations. But in fact, the main forces from the Zhytomyr ledge should be withdrawn and concentrated in the sector of the extremely weakened 8th German Army. Since the 7th breakthrough artillery corps was located in the ledge, it should have been deployed on two or three prepared defensive lines. These lines had to be specially adapted to fight tanks and take into account the possibility of organizing all-round defense on them. As it actually took place during the Zhytomyr defensive battle. Then it only remained to wait for the start of the German offensive.

When going over to the offensive, the enemy's strike force inevitably ran into the Soviet anti-tank defense and faced the need to break through it. Of course, after a while the Germans would realize that they were striking into the void. In the meantime, an avalanche of Soviet tanks would have swept away the 8th Army and rushed into a deep breakthrough. This opened up the possibility of both a strike in the rear of the 6th German Army, and the interception of rear communications of the entire Army Group South.

Manstein's strike force in such a situation would find itself between two fires. On the one hand, the Soviet breakthrough in the sector of the 8th Army needed to be closed immediately. On the other hand, the Zhytomyr ledge was a very convenient springboard for a powerful throw into the depths of the German defense. To storm it is more expensive for yourself, the enemy has created too powerful anti-tank lines here. This means that part of the forces had to be left at the ledge, which weakened the blow to the south, against the Soviet tank army that had broken through. The most optimal decision was to withdraw the troops further to the west, level the front line and try to create a solid defense. At the same time, in principle, there could not be any, even a temporary transition of the initiative to the Germans.

But if all these plans were too tricky and risky, then there was an easier way. As soon as it became clear that the Germans were preparing for a counteroffensive,

timely withdraw the troops from the ledge and go over to the defensive for the period of the enemy's attacking blows. The balance of power was such that the Germans would soon become bogged down in positional battles and would hasten to abandon their far-reaching intentions. As soon as they would run out of steam, the moment would come for the transition from defensive to offensive actions. Such a scenario was successfully used by the Red Army in the battles near Moscow and Stalingrad, as well as on the Kursk salient.

Chapter

11 The Second and Third

Stalingrads Cherkasy Cauldron

In January 1944, the precarious balance on the right bank of the Dnieper was upset. The Zhytomyr-Berdichevsk offensive operation of the troops of the 1st Ukrainian Front forced the German command to leave Kyiv again and take vigorous measures to prevent a further breakthrough of the 1st Guards Tank Army to the west. Manstein decided to launch counterattacks from the area of Vinnitsa and Uman. During January 10-14, 1944, the 1st Guards Tank, 38th and 40th Armies of the 1st Ukrainian Front fought a heavy oncoming battle with the enemy strike force. They had to withdraw 30 kilometers to the east and go on the defensive. The Soviet offensive continued only from the Zhytomyr ledge. As a result, it was not possible to realize the plan of the offensive operation - to defeat the enemy in the Brusilov area and reach the Lyubar - Vinnitsa - Lipovaya line. By mid-January, the 1st Ukrainian Front was entrenched on the Sarny-

Slavuta-Kazatin-Ilintsy line. As in November 1943, Vatutin's troops again formed an arc, strongly advanced to the west. At the same time, its left ledge ran through Rzhishchev and Kanev to the banks of the Dnieper. Further to the south, from Kanev to Nikopol, the enemy defense zone passed, where units of the 1st Panzer, 8th and 6th German armies were concentrated. One glance at the map was enough to see the possibility of reaching the rear and encircling the entire Cherkasy group of Manstein's troops. Thus, the idea of carrying out the Korsun Shevchenko offensive operation appeared in the General Staff. In order to deeply cover the right flank of the Cherkasy enemy grouping, the troops of the 2nd Ukrainian Front under

the command of Marshal I.S. Konev on January 5 began the assault on Kirovograd. By the morning of January 8, the city was liberated. But the offensive of the 4th shock and 53rd

armies north of Kirovograd was stopped by the enemy. The front stabilized on the Smela-Kanizh line. Konev decided to go on the defensive. Further

actions of the Soviet troops were planned as follows. The shock group of troops of the 1st Ukrainian Front as part of the 6th Tank Army of General A.G. Kravchenko, 27th Army General S.G. Trofimenko and the 40th Army of General F.F. Zhmachenko was supposed to advance to the southeast from the Zhashkov area.

The 2nd Ukrainian Front struck from the Verbovka and Krasnosilok area with the forces of the 5th Guards Tank Army, the 53rd and 4th Guards Armies. The troops of Vatutin and Konev were to advance in converging directions in order to encircle the enemy grouping. They were supposed to connect in Zvenigorodka. The task of supporting the strike groups of the fronts from the air was carried out by the 2nd and 5th air armies. In total, 27 divisions, 4 tank and 1 mechanized corps were involved in the Korsun-Shevchenko operation. As G.K. Zhukov: "The forces, of course, were enough to encircle and defeat the enemy"[158] .

The Korsun-Shevchenko operation began on January 24 with a strike by the 2nd Ukrainian Front in the general direction of Zvenigorodka. The next day, the 1st Ukrainian Front went on the offensive. During the first three days, the operation developed according to plan.

On January 27, the German command launched a counterattack against the troops of the 2nd Ukrainian Front in order to close the gap in their defenses that had formed as a result of their breakthrough. Since the advancing Soviet units were significantly stretched out, the Germans managed to achieve tactical success. The advanced 20th and 29th tank corps of the 5th Guards Tank Army were cut off from the main forces. Nevertheless, the commander of the 20th Tank Corps, Lieutenant General I.G. Lazarev decided to continue the offensive, despite the threat of encirclement. By the end of the day, his tankers drove the Germans out of the village of Shpola, which is 35 kilometers from Zvenigorodka.

Well aware of the extreme danger of the current situation for the two corps of Rotmistrov's tank army, the commander of the 1st Ukrainian Front decided to provide immediate assistance to the neighbors. Towards the tankers of Lazarev, he sent a shock mobile group under the command of Major General M.I. Savelyeva as part of

233rd tank brigade, 1228th self-propelled artillery regiment, motorized rifle battalion and anti-tank artillery battery. Savelyev's group successfully broke through the German defensive formations in the Lisyanka area and began to rapidly move behind enemy lines.

On January 28, the tankers of Lazarev and Saveliev united in Zvenigorodka, completing the encirclement of the Cherkasy group of Germans. But it took the troops of the 2nd Ukrainian Front another two days to punch a new hole in the German defenses and restore communication with the forward corps of the 5th Guards Tank Army. Marshal Konev had to bring additional forces into the battle for this purpose: the second echelon of Rotmistrov's army, the 18th tank corps and the cavalry corps of General A. G. Selivanov. At the same time, the troops of both fronts created an outer encirclement ring in order to prevent the Germans from carrying out an operation to release their encircled units.

According to official Soviet history, there were 11 German divisions in the Cherkasy pocket. A.M. Vasilevsky described in detail the composition of the encircled troops: "According to the data we received, this grouping consisted of nine infantry, one tank and one motorized divisions"[159] . Its total number was estimated at 75-80 thousand soldiers and officers. Thus, the specter of a new Stalingrad loomed before the Wehrmacht. G.K. also cited

similar figures. Zhukov: "According to the German trophy map for January 24, 1944, in the area of the Korsun of the Shevchenko ledge, which reached its peak to the very Dnieper, there were nine infantry, one tank and one motorized divisions that were part of the 1st Panzer Army of the German troops" [160] . Assuming the presence of such a powerful grouping in the boiler, the Soviet command requested significant reinforcements from the Stavka reserve. The 1st Ukrainian Front additionally received the 2nd Tank Army of General S.I. Bogdanov and the 47th Rifle Corps to reinforce the 6th Tank Army. The 2nd Ukrainian Front was given the 49th Rifle Corps and the 5th Engineering Brigade. I must say that the threat of encirclement of the Cherkasy group

was obvious to the German command. Based on this,

Back in December 1943, the commander of the 42nd Army Corps, General Lieb, ordered to prepare two defensive lines in his rear and move away from the front line food supplies transferred to the troops of the ring the former German occupation administration. When really closed, Lieb's foresight allowed the encirclement to avoid that disastrous hunger that the soldiers of the 6th Army near Stalingrad fully experienced. In addition, Manstein was able to quickly arrange the supply of the boiler through the "air bridge". Command in the pocket was taken over by the commander of the 11th Army Corps, General Stemmermann. At the headquarters of the Army Group "South" hasty measures were

taken to release the encircled troops. For this purpose, two strike groups were concentrated: the 48th tank corps of General Voormann in the Uman region and the 3rd tank corps under the command of General Breit in the Lisyanka region. In total, six tank divisions were supposed to participate in the release operation. But, as Manstein lamented in his memoirs, the concentration of deblocking troops was carried out very slowly due to the onset of mudslides, which turned all roads into mud.

Meanwhile, the Soviet command sought to use the time provided by the enemy to the maximum advantage. The terrain traversed by the inner front of the ring was mostly smooth as a table, with few features of relief suitable for organizing a solid defense. Therefore, from January 28, Soviet troops methodically squeezed the territory of the boiler and sought to cut the enemy grouping into parts isolated from each other. The first part of the plan worked out quite well. Manstein recalled: "As a result of enemy attacks from all sides, both corps crowded into a small space that stretched from north to south for 45 kilometers, and from west to east only 15-20 kilometers"[161]. The same was noted by General Lieb in his diary: "Our pocket is now so small that I can see almost the entire front line from my command post when it's not snowing . "[162] But the dissection of the encircled group did not happen. Thanks to the uninterrupted supply of ammunition through the "air bridge", the Germans held back the onslaught of the Soviet troops.

On February 3, General Wormann's 48th Tank Corps made the first attempt to break through the outer front of the encirclement in the sector of the 53rd Army of the 2nd Ukrainian Front in the area of Novo Mirgorod. German tank attacks were repulsed. Then Wormann regrouped and struck at the 40th Army of the 1st Ukrainian Front. To contain the onslaught of the enemy, who managed to penetrate the defensive formations of the Soviet troops, Marshal G.K. Zhukov brought the 2nd Panzer Army into battle. As for the German 3rd Panzer Corps, it has not yet completed its concentration.

On February 9, the Soviet command sent an ultimatum to General Stemmermann. The commander of the 42nd Army Corps wrote in his diary: "Generals Zhukov, Konev and Vatutin sent an emissary, a Russian lieutenant colonel, who arrived with a driver, an interpreter and a bugler to the positions of task force B, in order to convey to me and Stemmermann the terms of surrender. He was treated to champagne and cigarettes, but no answer was given. On the same day, a radiogram was received from Manstein's headquarters, in which instructions were given to break out of the encirclement on their own, in view of the protracted regrouping of the deblocking troops. The start date for the breakthrough was February 12. But General Lieb considered the date set unrealistic: "Army Headquarters insists that we start the breakthrough on February 12th. As much as we would like to, we will not be able to meet such a deadline. In this mud, the infantry is not capable of moving more than a thousand yards an hour . It took six days

to prepare for the breakthrough. On the night of February 16-17, the encircled German troops struck in the southwestern sector of the pocket, in the general direction of Lisyanka. A hole was made in the Soviet defense. Domestic and German sources describe further events in different ways. According to the memoirs of G.K. Zhukova: "All morning on February 17, a fierce battle went on to destroy the breaking through columns of German troops, which were mostly destroyed and captured. Their attempt to break through was repulsed by the 27th Army of S.G. Trofimenko and the 4th Guards Army of the 2nd Ukrainian Front. Only a part of tanks and armored personnel carriers with generals, officers and SS men managed to break out of the encirclement . And here is what Manstein wrote: "On the night of 16 to 17

February at 1:25 a.m. joyful news came that the first contact between the corps emerging from the encirclement and the advanced units of the 3rd tank corps had been established. The

enemy, who was between them, was literally [crushed](#) . —
So what actually happened in the Cherkasy cauldron?

Lost second Stalingrad

First of all, the Soviet command made the same mistake that took place at Stalingrad. But in the opposite sense. If the number of encircled Paulus troops was estimated at 7-8 divisions, and there were 22 of them, then Stemmermann's grouping was determined at 11 divisions, while in fact there were half as many. The exact list of encircled German units was as follows: the 11th Army Corps, consisting of the 57th, 72nd, 389th Infantry Divisions, the 42nd Army Corps, consisting of the 88th and 112th Infantry Divisions, plus attached 11 5th SS Panzer Division "Viking" and the Belgian SS Volunteer Brigade "Wallonia" of 2,000 men. Thus, in total, there were five infantry divisions, one tank division and a separate SS infantry brigade in the Cherkasy pocket, in the ranks of which there were about 40 thousand soldiers and officers. Therefore, the figures cited by AM Vasilevsky are questionable: "Fierce battles to eliminate the Korsun-Shevchenko group continued until February 18. During these battles, 55 thousand enemy soldiers and officers were killed and wounded, more than 18 thousand were taken prisoner "[166] . All this is all the more doubtful since the infantry divisions of both German corps were exhausted ~~by~~ previous battles and did not have a full-time staff.

Probably, the Soviet command was misled by the mentioned G.K. Zhukov with a trophy card dated January 24, 1944. It marked the so-called task force B, which was mistaken for a corps in the Soviet headquarters. In fact, the 112th Infantry Division from the Lieb Corps was called this way. His commander noted with satisfaction in his diary: "Not bad: they think we are stronger than we are . "[167] However, this circumstance played a more positive role ~~e-th~~ than a negative one. Taking the division for the corps, the Soviet command pulled to the boiler

numerous reinforcements. Which only exacerbated the already difficult situation of those surrounded. It remained only to destroy the enemy by powerful pressure of many times superior forces.

Marshal Zhukov, who led the operation to eliminate the Cherkassy group, reported to the Headquarters that the enemy was actually broken. In a telegram dated February 9, it was said: "According to the testimony of the prisoners, during the period of fighting in the encirclement, the enemy troops suffered heavy losses. At present, confusion is felt among the soldiers and officers, reaching in some cases to ~~panic~~"[168] . He assessed the situation on February 14 as follows: "It became clear to the soldiers, officers and generals of the German troops that the help promised to them would not come. According to the stories of the prisoners, the troops were seized with complete despair, especially when they became aware of the flight on airplanes of some generals . General Lieb saw the state of combat readiness of his subordinates somewhat differently: "I examined the 110th Grenadier Regiment and Task Force B. The morale of the troops is good. Ration is sufficient. Sugar, sausages, cigarettes and bread are enough to la his opinion was confirmed by the counterattacks inflicted by the corps in the direction of Boguslav, south of Steblev and on Shenderovka. The impression of the Soviet command from these actions of the 42nd German Corps was such that G.K. Zhukov, in the above-mentioned telegram to Stalin dated February 9, reported: "According to intelligence, the encircled enemy concentrated the main forces in the Steblev-Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi area." And the true intentions of the Germans became clear three days later, when they delivered the main blow in the opposite direction, knocked down units of the 27th Army from their positions, captured Shenderovka, Khilki and Novaya Buda. The capture of these settlements was extremely important in connection with the upcoming breakthrough to the southwest, towards Lisyanka.



The calculation of the German mortar took up positions near the wrecked and abandoned T-34-76. Autumn 1942



German anti-aircraft gunners are preparing to repel the raid.

Since both sides actively used winter uniforms and white camouflage suits to distinguish themselves from the soldiers of the Red Army, the Germans often wore red bands on their sleeves, as can be clearly seen in the photo. Winter 1942/43



German column on the way to the front. Spring 1943



***A young Red Army soldier in summer field uniform.
Summer 1943***



A couple of Soviet snipers in position.

Simple but reliable SVT-40 rifles will be sent to
the world is still a lot of enemy soldiers. Summer 1943



*Crew members of the T-34-76 tank replenish ammunition. Summer
1943*



Soviet tankers.

In addition to awards, their tunics are decorated with "Guard" badges, which indicates that the tankers belong to the Guards unit. Summer 1943



Pilots of the 59th Assault Aviation Regiment before taking off on a mission.

The presence of epaulettes on the tunics clearly indicates that the picture was taken no earlier than 1943. An order is visible on the chest of the senior lieutenant sitting in the center

Patriotic War of the 1st degree on the block, which is typical for the early samples of the award. Summer 1943



A young German lieutenant, marked by numerous awards: the Iron Cross and the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross, the Golden German Cross, the signs "For Wound" and "For Participation on the attack."

The manner of wearing, characteristic of the Germans, is clearly visible. pistol on the left thigh with the handle forward. Summer 1943



A mobile German command post based on an armored personnel carrier.

It is clearly seen that it is equipped with several antennas for radio communication with the troops. Summer 1943



Manual application of camouflage coloring to an armored personnel carrier of one of the motorized reconnaissance units of the Wehrmacht. Summer 1943



German soldiers from the 20th Panzer Division on the street of one of the occupied settlements. Summer 1943

G.



Destroyed Soviet tank T-34.

The destruction of the side and the undercarriage, which arose from the hit of an artillery shell into the skating rink, is clearly visible. Autumn 1943

On February 12, in a conversation with G.K. Zhukov on a direct wire, Stalin said:

- Let Vatutin personally take care of the operation of the 13th and 60th armies in the Rovno-Lutsk-Dubno region, and you take responsibility to prevent the enemy strike group from breaking through on the outer front of the Lisyanka region. All.

A couple of hours later, the next directive was received.
content:

"Commander of the 1st Ukrainian Front.

Commander of the 2nd Ukrainian Front.

Tov. Yuryev [pseudonym T.K.

Zhukov]. In view of the fact that in order to eliminate the Korsun grouping of the enemy, it is necessary to combine the efforts of all troops operating with this task, the Headquarters of the Supreme High Command

orders: ... Comrade. Yuriev to be released from monitoring the liquidation of the Korsun grouping of Germans and entrusted to him to coordinate the actions of the troops of the 1st and 2nd Ukrainian fronts with the task of preventing the enemy from breaking through from Lisyanka and Zvenigorodka to connect with the Korsun grouping of the enemy "

[171]. At this time, the advanced units of the 3rd Panzer Corps had already reached Lisyanka.

On the same day, the commander of the 2nd Ukrainian Front received an order to strike with the forces of the 4th Guards and 53rd armies from the east to Steblev, in the rear of the enemy grouping, preparing to meet Breit's advancing tank group. It is interesting that General Lieb noted in his diary: "I am reducing the eastern sector of the front, including the evacuation of Korsun on the night of February 13-14. The troops released in this way will be able to participate in the breakthrough

by February 15"[172] . On the evening of February 15, the commander of the 42nd Corps gave the troops a combat order. Among other things, it was said that General Stemmermann was taking command of the rearguard of the 57th and 88th Infantry Divisions, which would protect the rear and flanks of the breakthrough forces. After 23.00 on February 16, they will retreat to a pre-prepared line. Then to the next and so on. That is, the Germans were the most prepared for the strike of the Soviet troops from Steblev.

But the direction to Lisyanka turned out to be undisguised. As General Lieb noted in his diary: "The enemy was taken by surprise. Taken prisoners. It was not until the next day that it became clear that, under the cover of a heavy snowfall, the Russians had withdrawn most of their forces from the southern front of the encirclement, to be used on February 17 for an offensive west of Steblev . Therefore, there could be no question of any destruction of the encircled grouping. Manstein recalled: "On February 28, we learned that 30–32 thousand people had come out of the cauldron. Since it contained six divisions and one brigade, given the low number of troops, this accounted for the bulk of the active bayonets . So it is not entirely clear in honor of what triumph on February 18 Moscow saluted Marshal Konev. After all, a few months later, the German divisions that escaped from the Cherkasy pocket took part in further battles in Ukraine.

Meanwhile, the Soviet command had an absolutely real opportunity to arrange a second Stalingrad for the Germans. Fortunately, there was an experience of the first. First of all, it was necessary to completely isolate the encircled German troops. The "air bridge" played an important role in maintaining their combat readiness. Let us turn again to the diary of General Lieb: "January 29. Air supply has begun.

"January 31st. Insufficient fighter air support.

Ammunition and fuel are running

out." "February 2. Air supply is improving."

"February 3rd. Air supply continues to improve." February 16th.

A sufficient amount of ammunition was dropped in aircraft containers last night. With this, we are all right ... "It was necessary to make sure that they would

not be all right with this. The 2nd and 5th air armies had a sufficient number of fighter aircraft, which could well fulfill the task of disrupting the supply of the boiler from the outside. In itself, this would further weaken the already small enemy forces. Yes, and bomber aircraft could be involved in strikes against airfields where German transport aircraft were concentrated.

Further, after the assault on Shenderovka, the intentions of the German command became, in essence, obvious. According to front-line intelligence, the main forces of the Germans were concentrated in Steblevo and

Korsun. In addition, Soviet troops had been continuously attacking Stebliv since 28 January. Consequently, it was here that the enemy created a solid defense. In theory, the idea of a strike to the rear of the Germans going to break through looked right. But in practical terms, it had a major drawback due to the presence of echeloned defensive lines in this area. So it was impossible to attack from Steblev's side. And even more so, it was not necessary to weaken the inner front of the ring in the area of \u200b\u200bLisyanka, where the Germans delivered the main blow. The obvious

decision in the current situation to strengthen and at any cost to keep the direction to Lisyanka would eventually lead to the defeat of Stemmermann's grouping. A description by General Lieb has been preserved of the state in which the German troops approached Lisyanka. Management was broken and by the morning of February 17 it was lost. The various divisions and regiments were mixed up, turning into "large disorganized masses of troops." They were a very tempting target. But there was no one to hit them. The deblocking

troops looked no better. Of the entire 3rd Panzer Corps, only three companies of tanks and a motorized infantry company of the 1st Panzer Division reached Lisyanka. Just think

what kind of pogrom even one of our tank corps could arrange if it appeared in the Lisyanka area! But in fact, as many as three Soviet tank armies, four separate tank corps and one mechanized corps were involved in this operation. But, as usual, all of them were scattered around the entire perimeter of the boiler in the form of separate units and brigades. Therefore, only 20 Soviet tanks were on the way of the breaking through German troops. The main forces, meanwhile, stormed the German defenses in the Steblev area.

The Soviet command had complete information about the position of the enemy troops. It was known that Breit's tanks would not be able to reach the pocket. There was no doubt that the encircled divisions would have to break through on their own, in the direction of Lisyanka. It only remained to transfer a couple of tank corps to this direction and smear the Germans with caterpillars in the snow. At the same time, there would be enough forces to hold back Wormann's corps south of Zvenigorodka. All six German divisions would have been destroyed. And Manstein would never have written in his memoirs: "We succeeded

save these two corps from the fate that befell the 6th Army near Stalingrad.

Kamyanets-Podilsky boiler

After the completion of the Korsun-Shevchenko offensive operation, the Soviet command took an operational pause. But the respite, which the German troops, exhausted by heavy battles, so needed, did not promise to be long. Already on February 20, 1944, Marshal G.K. Zhukov reported to the Headquarters his thoughts on further offensive operations of the 1st and 2nd Ukrainian fronts. The main emphasis was placed on not giving the enemy time to prepare for new battles, to put his battered troops in order and to move additional reserves from the depths. First of all, the configuration of the front line was extremely unfavorable for the Germans. The 13th and 60th armies of

the 1st Ukrainian Front moved far to the west by the end of February, reaching Lutsk, Rovno and Dubno. The troops of the 2nd Ukrainian Front penetrated deeply into the defensive formations of the 8th German Army. Thus, an arc appeared on the map of the theater of operations, in which the ill-fated German 1st Panzer Army, allegedly defeated during the Korsun-Shevchenko operation, was located. Moreover, special attention was drawn to its stretching over a huge distance from the city of Brody through Shepetovka and Vinnitsa to Uman. In itself, this spoke of an extremely weak operational density, replete with vulnerabilities. Starting from barely covered joints with the 2nd and 8th armies and ending with a number of somehow patched gaps along the front. At

the Soviet command once again had a chance to finally bring everything together

scores with Colonel-General Hube and, in general, defeat Manstein's army group.

In accordance with the plans of the Headquarters, the 1st Ukrainian Front was preparing the main attack from the Dubno-Shepetovka-Lyubar region in the general direction of Chernivtsi in order to defeat the Kamenets-Podolsk enemy grouping. With access to the foothills of the Carpathians, it was supposed to cut the German front and cut off the shortest routes of strategic retreat to the territory for Manstein's troops.

Romania and Hungary. The task of the 2nd Ukrainian Front was to advance through Uman to Mogilev-Podolsky and Khotyn, covering the Kamyanets-Podilsky group from the south. With its left wing, the front of Marshal I.S. Koneva was supposed to go to the Balti-lasi line. Due to the fact that on February 28, 1944, General N.F. Vatutin was mortally wounded, the Headquarters appointed Marshal G.K. Zhukov.

On March 4, 1944, the Red Army went on the offensive. The troops of the 1st Ukrainian Front successfully broke into the enemy defenses in the Shumskoye-Lyubar sector. The command immediately introduced shock mobile groups into the gap - the 3rd Guards and 4th Tank Armies. By the end of March 7, both of these armies had advanced more than 100 kilometers into the depth of the enemy's defenses.

The troops of the 2nd Ukrainian Front acted just as successfully. They delivered a strong blow at the junction between the 1st Panzer and 8th German armies. As a result, a vast gap was made in the area from Uman to Vinnitsa. The front commander threw the 5th Guards Tank Army into a deep gap. Manstein recalled that

the German front in those days simply crumbled under the influence of Russian tank wedges. In addition to breaking through in the zone of the 8th Army, Soviet tanks crushed the right flank of the 1st Tank Army south of Vinnitsa and reached the Bug. At the same time, Hitler declared Vinnitsa a "fortress", which doomed its garrison to inevitable death. The 3rd Guards Tank Army captured the left flank of the Khube troops west of Proskurov. The 13th German artillery corps was under the threat of encirclement in the Brody area. Only in the Ternopil direction did the Germans temporarily manage to hold the front, bringing into battle all the available reserves.

On March 19, Manstein turned to Hitler with a proposal to withdraw Army Group A and the 8th Army beyond the Dniester, and put Army Group South on a solid defense north of the Carpathians. But Hitler forbade retreat and ordered to leave Army Group A on the Bug. Seeing the imminent approach of disaster, Manstein on March 22 sent his proposals to the Chief of the General Staff, Zeitzler, in the hope that he could influence the opinion of the Fuhrer. Hitler continued to stubbornly stand his ground. Thus, he provided an invaluable

service to the Soviet command. On March 25, the advanced units of the 8th Guards Tank Corps reached the near approaches to Chernivtsi. The 1st Panzer Army found itself in an operational encirclement.

Since the 40th Army of the 2nd Ukrainian Front lagged far behind its neighbors in terms of the pace of advancement, the bridge across the Dniester in Khotyn became a corridor connecting the encircled German troops with the "mainland". This corridor was cut only on 1 April. During the inspection carried out by General Hube, it turned out that there were food and ammunition in the boiler for two weeks. But the fuel was running out. Therefore, the quickly created "air bridge" was mainly assigned the task of supplying the encircled troops with fuel and lubricants. The Soviet command

assumed the presence of large enemy forces in the boiler. G.K. Zhukov recalled: "By the end of March, the enemy grouping in the amount of 21 divisions, including ten tank, one motorized, one artillery, was basically surrounded. The 18th and 38th Armies, part of the formations of the 1st Guards Army, the 1st and 4th Tank Armies were moving from the east to destroy the encircled grouping. There was another opportunity to put the German army on the brink of a disaster similar to Stalingrad. Moreover, its consequences in the spring of 1944 became much more difficult. The destruction of such a large grouping opened the Red Army a direct path to Europe - to Romania, Hungary and the Balkans.

On March 25, the commander of Army Group South arrived for a detailed report on the situation at the Fuhrer's Headquarters in the Berghof. Here he was caught by the news of the encirclement of German troops in the Kamenetz-Podolsky cauldron. Manstein foresaw such a development of events, so he went to report to Hitler with a ready-made plan for the breakthrough of the 1st Panzer Army. But, as usual, the Fuhrer gave his field marshal an ugly scene. Manstein recalled: "There was a sharp argument between Hitler and me, during which he tried to blame me for the unfavorable developments on the front of the army group. Hitler did not want to admit that the inevitable consequence of the breakthrough of the 1st Panzer Army to the west should be a corresponding shift in the front line. In addition, General

Hube, who proposed his own breakthrough plan. But by the evening of March 25, Hitler's mood suddenly changed. To Manstein's surprise, the Fuhrer declared that he agreed with his operational plan and had already given orders to allocate the necessary number of reserves to form a strike force. The newly formed 2nd SS Panzer Corps - the 9th Volunteer Division "Hohenstaufen" and the 10th "Frundsberg", as well as the 100th Mountain Rifle and 367th Infantry Divisions were included in the relief forces. The command of the shock forces was taken by General Walter Wenck, whom even the Fuhrer, who despised his Prussian generals, called "a very worthy man." As the German command expected, after the

completion of the encirclement of the 1st Panzer Army, the activity of the Soviet troops began to wane. Marshal Zhukov explained this by the fact that our troops operating on the inner front of the ring were extremely weakened by previous battles and could not provide energetic actions to dismember and destroy the encircled enemy group. One way or another, the Germans had the opportunity, without much interference, to regroup their forces inside the boiler. They were able to properly prepare for a breakthrough.

On March 27, the 1st Panzer Army launched a surprise attack in the western sector of the pocket in the general direction of Buchach. At the same time, two divisions of the rear guard, allocated to cover, held back the onslaught of Soviet troops in the northern and eastern sectors, defending the rear of their grouping going to break through. And at the tip of the tank wedge, the elite divisions of the SS "Leibstandarte" and "Reich" were moving. Their blow was so unexpected for the Soviet troops that the SS tankers captured a valuable trophy - three intact bridges across the Zbruch River. This made it possible to quickly move forward and immediately force the next water line - the Seret River. Thus, only 35 kilometers were left for the forward units of the 1st Panzer to the point of connection with the deblocking troops of Wenck in Buchach.

As soon as General Hube was successful, Manstein gave the order to launch a counterattack. On April 5, the tank wedge, which consisted of the SS Frundsberg and Hohenstaufen divisions, began to advance from the Podgaitsy area in a southeasterly direction. Their blow was taken over by the 18th Rifle Corps of the 1st Guards Army.

But it was not possible to hold back the onslaught of the enemy. G.K. Zhukov briefly mentioned in his memoirs that the defense of the 18th Corps was crushed and the German tank group rushed to the Buchach area to meet its units emerging from the encirclement. On April 9, the German troops united. The 1st Panzer Army occupied the line of defense assigned to it north of the Carpathians and soon took part in new battles. For this brilliant operation, Manstein received swords to the Knight's Cross and ... was removed from the post of commander of Army

Group South. In the form of a consolation prize, the Soviet command got the garrison of the "Ternopil fortress". To destroy it, Marshal Zhukov gathered significant forces: the 4th Guards Tank, 15th and 94th Rifle Corps. The assault on the city lasted two days. Having completed the liquidation of the enemy, surrounded in Ternopil, the troops of the 1st Ukrainian Front went over to the defensive at the line Torchin - Berestechko - Kolomyia - Kuta. Thus, the task of defeating the entire southern German grouping could not be completed. The final expulsion of the invaders from Ukrainian soil was to be completed during the summer campaign.

Lost third Stalingrad

The situation that developed in the Kamenets-Podolsky cauldron, in many of its characteristic features, resembled the Stalingrad cauldron. First of all, such a similarity was manifested in the decisions of the German commander in chief. Hitler repeated the same mistakes that Stalin made in 1941-1942. Here is what Manstein wrote about this: "At 4 p.m. on March 24, a decision arrived that the Fuhrer agreed in general terms that the 1st Panzer Army would break through to the west. However, he continued to demand that she hold basically the same section of the front between the Dniester and Ternopil ... The situation was exactly the same as near Stalingrad in December 1942. And then Hitler was ready to agree with the attempt of the 6th Army to break out of the encirclement towards the 4th Panzer Army. But at the same time, he demanded to keep Stalingrad." [177]. That is, Hitler did everything possible to expose his troops

under destruction. The Soviet command could only take advantage of this opportunity.

Further, both at one time Paulus and Hube, despite the critical situation, wasted valuable time in useless debates with the commander of the army group. He persistently refused to carry out the Manstein plan, based on the idea of a breakthrough in the western sector, in turn offering to break through to the south, beyond the Dniester. Both Manstein himself and his chief of staff, General Busse, were tired of proving to the stubborn that it was in the southern sector that the Russians were waiting for an attempt to break through and were preparing an appropriate meeting for the German troops. Only after a direct order from the Headquarters of the Fuhrer, Hube agreed to obey.

The Soviet command did not escape the repetition of the Stalingrad mistakes. Again, in terms of an accurate assessment of the number of encircled enemy troops. As we remember, Marshal Zhukov wrote about the encirclement of 21 German divisions. In reality, there were only eight divisions in the Kamenetz-Podolsk pocket. Of course, there was nothing wrong with such a miscalculation. Exaggerated information about the enemy's forces forced the commander of the 1st Ukrainian Front to build up his own forces around the perimeter of the boiler, which clearly did not improve the situation of those surrounded. But the main problem was that G.K. Zhukov fatal inaccuracies in determining the direction of the German breakthrough.

The former front commander described the course of his thoughts as follows: "We then had solid data obtained from various sources about the decision of the encircled enemy to break through to the south across the Dniester in the Zolishchyk region. Such a decision seemed quite possible and logical. In this case, the enemy, having crossed the

Dniester, could occupy the southern bank of the river and organize defense there. This was facilitated by the fact that the right-flank 40th Army of the 2nd Ukrainian Front on March 30 still did not approach Khotyn.

We believed that under these conditions it was necessary to cover the enemy with the 1st Panzer Army deeper, transferring its main forces across the Dniester. But when the command of the Army Group "South" became aware of the interception of the withdrawal routes to the south by the Soviet troops, it ordered the encircled troops to break through not to the south, but to the west through Buchach and Podgaisky .

Thus, the Soviet commander repeated the mistake he made two months earlier when liquidating the Cherkasy pocket. He regrouped his main forces, exposing the front in the direction of the German breakthrough. A paradoxical situation was created when the Germans, many times inferior to the Red Army in manpower and equipment, successfully carried out a breakthrough by concentrating absolutely superior strike groups. So it was in Lisanka in February 1944, the same thing happened in April in the Buchach-Podgaitsy area.

Interestingly, General Hube,

in his considerations, showed complete solidarity with Marshal Zhukov. He stubbornly did not want to break through to the west, but offered a breakthrough in a southerly direction across the Dniester. Fortunately for the Germans, Manstein was one of those people who knew how to defend his opinion. Otherwise, all eight divisions of General Hube would have been crushed into a cake by the Soviet 1st Guards Tank Army. This was clearly seen by his boss: "Of course, the way south through the Dniester was at first less risky. However, a more detailed analysis showed that he was leading the army to death ... The enemy was advancing from the east already south of the Dniester. Sooner or later, the army would find itself between these advancing enemy forces and those of his two tank armies, which had just cut its communications and were about to [179] force the Dniester in the rear of the army in a southerly direction. we'll hit west. In the end, Manstein's plan was a complete success. The surprise achieved played a major role in this.

Meanwhile, the 1st Panzer Army had every chance that the Kamenetz-Podolsky cauldron would become its grave. As early as March 15, the command of Army Group South understood that Hube's troops were in danger of being surrounded and needed to be withdrawn as soon as possible. But the corresponding order was slowed down by higher authorities. Thus, the German "tops" actually played into the hands of the enemy. The Soviet troops received enough time not only to complete the encirclement, but also to eliminate

the boiler. To begin with, it was necessary to stop the activities of the enemy "air bridge" in the most decisive way. It has already been said above that the encircled troops experienced serious

fuel problems. Gasoline was so scarce that General Hube gave the order to abandon all vehicles, with the exception of military equipment. There were no fuel reserves in the boiler, they were replenished exclusively by deliveries through the "air bridge". But the Germans were planning a major regrouping. From the southern sector of the boiler, they needed to transfer all their forces to the western one and then fight their way through the defensive formations of the Soviet troops for about 150 kilometers. But without continuous replenishment of fuel reserves, neither regrouping nor a subsequent breakthrough was simply impossible. At best, the Germans would have had to abandon half of their tanks to fill the fuel tanks in the rest. At worst, they would have gone to the breakthrough on foot.

However, according to the established tradition, the Soviet command gave the Germans complete freedom in establishing an "air bridge". Individual Soviet pilots fought German transport aviation on their own initiative. In this sense, the memoirs of a participant in those battles, the illustrious ace, twice Hero of the Soviet Union Arseny Vorozheykin, are very indicative: "By the end of the day it became known that at night and at dawn fascist transport planes passed over us. They delivered ammunition and fuel to the encircled troops. If the planes appeared that night, Khokhlov and I prepared to take off to intercept ... The crescent of the young moon shone with might and main, and I clearly saw that the three-engine Junkers-52 were flying. Vehicles with low speed, without armor, protective machine guns only from above. Come from below, from behind, and you

out of reach.

After the first turn, a huge black-and-red tongue stuck out from the port side of the Junkers ... The second transporter is next in line, and behind it is a whole string. And there are no enemy fighters. That's great! Bay without looking back, as if on targets. In addition, moonlight illuminates targets. Yes, and the night luminary will help to sit down on the ground "[180] .

In the Air Force of the 1st Ukrainian Front in the spring of 1944 there were many other, as dashing and experienced air fighters as Vorozheikin. Within a matter of days, they could completely clear the sky from German transport aircraft and disrupt the supply of the boiler. But for some reason, the command did not set such a task for them. IN

As a result, German tanks could confidently continue their movement to the west.

The miscalculation in determining the direction of the breakthrough of the encircled enemy troops also looks rather strange. G.K. Zhukov recalled: "As it turned out later from captured documents, the command of Army Group South gathered a significant group of troops, including the 9th and 10th SS Panzer Divisions, and on April 4 dealt a strong blow to our outer front from the Podgaittsy area" [181]. How could it happen that the Soviet command did not notice the concentration of a significant group of enemy troops in front of their outer front? Where did the intelligence of the 1st Guards Army look? Front intelligence? Undercover intelligence? Air reconnaissance? Where did the GRU and the General Staff look? After all, an entire SS Panzer Corps is not a needle in a haystack. Its appearance in the immediate vicinity of the western sector of the boiler in itself served as a clear sign of the preparation of a deblocking operation, that is, a warning to the Soviet command. Moreover, the concentration of deblocking troops took the Germans almost two weeks.

But even if Manstein managed to keep the arrival of the SS corps secret, the movements of German troops in the pocket could not be a secret for the command of the 1st Ukrainian Front. By that time, such a powerful partisan movement had been created on the territory of Western Ukraine that the Germans did not know peace day or night. For example, Guy Sayer, a veteran of the Grossdeutschland division, wrote in his book *The Unknown Soldier* about how much trouble the partisans caused the German troops, especially in the spring of 1944. Therefore, it is not difficult to assume that the front headquarters, through the commanders of the partisan detachments, was well aware of the movements of enemy units. The next step

was to make a decision that suited the situation. First of all, it was necessary to strengthen the defenses of the 1st Guards Army in the area of the upcoming German breakthrough. Mainly anti-tank. Tightly cover the threatening area from the air, since the superiority of Soviet aviation was overwhelming. In the end, the command simply needed to turn to the experience of the Stalingrad battles in December 1942, since the situation in the Buchach area was largely similar. It remains to wait until

the Germans will not fully invest in strikes against our defenses and will not throw all available forces into battle. That's when the moment came for the transition to counter-offensive actions. The forces of three Soviet tank armies would be enough just to repel the attacks of the SS corps, and to defeat the troops of Hube. Moreover, there were various options here, from applying simultaneous strikes to destroying the enemy in parts - first outside the boiler, and then inside it. Here is G.K. Zhukov regretted one of these missed opportunities: "Now, analyzing this whole operation, I think that the 1st Panzer Army should have been turned from the Chertkovo-Tolstoy region to the east to strike at the encircled grouping" [182] . Excellent solution! In this case, the defeat of Hube's troops could have been completed even before Manstein had time to fully concentrate the Wenck strike group. Therefore, the whole operation to unblock would lose its meaning, since there would be no one to unblock.

Let us turn again to Manstein's memoirs: "It is still necessary to explain why on the right flank, in the zone of the 8th and 1st tank armies, there was such a sharp deterioration in the situation. The command of both armies was not guilty of this. Such a development of events was explained by the fact that on this flank of the army group there were not enough of those six and a half divisions, which, after being liberated from the Cherkasy pocket, were assigned to the replenishment in the governor general. There was nothing to replace them

with now . "[183] I wonder how and with what the Germans could compensate for the loss of the entire 1st Panzer Army? Its destruction in the cauldron meant the opening for the Soviet troops of a wide gate to Europe, the penetration of our tank armies into the deep rear of the enemy, the inexorable approach to the heart of the Nazi Reich back in 1944. Just as in their time, Stalingrad, and the Kamenets-Podolsk pocket could have influenced the fate of the entire war as a whole.

Chapter

12 The Panther Line

At the final stage of the Great Patriotic War, the issue of releasing Leningrad was still one of the most important on the agenda in the work of the Headquarters of the Supreme High Command and the General Staff. Beginning in January 1942, the Soviet command made repeated attempts to break through the blockade and fully restore communication between the Northern capital and the mainland. Nevertheless, units of the 18th German Army continued to hold their positions and parried all the blows of the Leningrad and Volkhov fronts. A favorable situation in this area had developed by the autumn of 1943, when the strategic initiative completely passed to the Red Army. The defeat of the Nazi troops in the

decisive battle on the Kursk Bulge marked a radical turning point in the course of the war and allowed the Soviet command to come close to solving large-scale offensive tasks. Therefore, in the North-Western strategic direction, it was not only about lifting the blockade. In September 1943, the General Staff was in full swing developing a plan for an offensive operation, the purpose of which was to liberate the Baltic states and defeat the entire Army Group North. By that time, the troops of the Western Front were rapidly approaching the borders of Latvia and Lithuania. Thus, a real opportunity opened up for delivering a powerful coordinated strike by the forces of five fronts - Leningrad, Volkhov, North-Western, Kalinin and Western. Various options were considered and analyzed in the Operational Directorate of the General Staff. A proposal was made - to strike the main blow on the sector of the North-Western Front from the Staraya Russa region directly to the west, which made it possible to cut Army Group North into two parts. But upon further consideration, this proposal had to be abandoned. The nature of the terrain was extremely inconvenient for the advancing side. In addition, since the time of the Demyansk operation, the enemy had a well-prepared, solid defense in this area.

Further, the General Staff developed a plan for a breakthrough in the Western Front, followed by a turn of its right wing to the north. At the same time, the Germans would have to significantly reduce the density of their defending troops in front of the Kalinin Front and open the way for him to Rezekne. A strike by the Kalinin Front in the direction of Rezekne would lead to the flank and then the rear of the enemy, which in turn seriously weakened the possibility of his resistance in front of the North-Western Front, which, with such a development of events, could quickly and without heavy losses move forward. Unfortunately, it was not possible to put this plan into action, since it was based on the assumption that the current pace of the offensive of the Western Front would be maintained and our troops would be able to create an operationally convenient ledge. But from the reports of the front headquarters it became clear: the troops were running out of steam, bogged down in the enemy's defense. It is impossible to count on their further advance, and therefore the very tempting plan of inflicting a flank attack had to be stopped. In

its final form, the plan of the offensive operation looked as follows. The main blow was supposed to be delivered along the Dvina River in the direction of Polotsk, Daugavpils and go to Riga. In this way, the Army Group North was cut off from the rest of the German troops and from the territory of Germany. This was followed by a series of auxiliary strikes with the aim of fragmenting the Baltic German grouping, isolating and destroying it piece by piece. In addition, the General Staff had intelligence information about the possible withdrawal of German troops in the sectors of the Leningrad, Volkhov and North-Western fronts. The commander of Army Group North, Colonel-General Lindemann, indeed turned to the Fuhrer's Headquarters with a proposal to withdraw his troops to a more advantageous line in terms of organizing long-term defense along the line of the Western Dvina River. Hold on at all costs—such was the general meaning of the reply from Berlin. On October 7, 1943, troops of the Kalinin Front captured Nevel by storm. This city was a

major stronghold and an important communications hub for the enemy. With the capture of Nevel, the Germans lost the only railway line in this area.

front. But the main thing was that Nevel was at the junction of Army Groups North and Center. The Soviet command had the opportunity to drive a tank wedge between the two German groups and significantly expand the breakthrough. The German officer Otto

Carius, a participant in those battles, recalled: "Unexpectedly, we received an order to march to the Nevel area. The Russians attacked there and took the city. The attack followed so unexpectedly that some of our troops were caught on the move. Real panic set in. It was quite fair that the commandant of Nevel had to answer before a military court for flagrant disregard for security measures. Of course

in addition to bringing the commandant to justice, the German command took other hasty measures to prevent its enemy from developing a tactical success into an operational one. Since the heavily swampy terrain actually tied the fighting to a few roads, the Germans blocked the strategic highway Velikiye Luki - Nevel - Vitebsk with tank artillery barriers. The advancing Soviet troops were fiercely resisted. Heavy fighting ensued.

At the same time, the Kalinin Front was given the task of taking Gorodok. The capture of this settlement would make it possible to bypass Vitebsk and cover the entire left flank of Army Group Center from the north. But here events developed much less favorably than in the Nevel area. At the initial stage of the operation, Soviet troops managed to penetrate the enemy's defenses. The Germans then quickly recovered from the confusion and stopped the further advance of the Russians. Almost immediately, the battles for Gorodok moved into a protracted stage. Thus, the Soviet command failed to realize the plan of a deep breakthrough in the Kalinin Front. Army Group "North" stood up in a tough defense and held back the onslaught of our troops.

The Headquarters and the General Staff understood perfectly well that it was necessary to look for a new, more optimal solution as soon as possible. It was impossible to give the Germans time to prepare and organize defense in their operational rear. In addition, the trampling of our troops on the spot allowed the enemy to fortify Gorodok and other important settlements in the front line more and more. Therefore, already October 12

In 1943, it was decided to form a new front - the Baltic. His task was to break through the enemy defenses in the Idritsa area with a further offensive directly to Riga. The new front was created on the basis of the administration of the disbanded Bryansk Front and by the allocation of troops from the reserves of the Headquarters of the Supreme High Command. Army General M.M. was appointed commander. Popov. Shortly before taking up his new position, he conducted a successful offensive operation in a theater of operations that was very similar in terms of conditions. The troops of General Popov liberated Bryansk, entering the rear of a well-fortified German group. Headquarters believed that this experience could be used in the

Baltics. On November 1, the troops of the Baltic Front went on the offensive. But, as S.M. Shtemen-ko, "the enemy was well versed in all these subtleties." The offensive of Popov's troops bogged down almost on the first day. Their advance did not exceed a few hundred meters per day. The fighting in the Idritsa direction lasted for about two weeks. The losses of our troops were great and did not at all justify the results achieved. The enemy's resistance could not be broken, so the decision to stop further attacks by a well-organized, solid enemy defense looked quite reasonable.

It was decided to carry out a new breakthrough in the Gorodok area. On October 20, 1943, the Kalinin Front became known as the 1st Baltic. He had to storm Gorodok again in order to move further to Vitebsk, and then take Polotsk, Daugavpils and Riga. To strengthen the former Kalinin Front, the Soviet command regrouped, transferring additional troops from the Idritsk direction, from Popov's front, renamed the 2nd Baltic. In accordance with his favorite principle "cadres decide everything," Stalin

decided to strengthen the command of the 1st Baltic Front. On November 19, 1943, General of the Army I.Kh. Bagramyan. From the Supreme Commander, he received a categorical order - "to put an end to Gorodok." A.M. Vasilevsky, in his memoirs, drew attention to this characteristic feature of the Stalinist leadership style: if things are not going well on some front, then the commander must be changed.

Of course, Bagramyan confidently declared that "Comrade Stalin's order will be carried out." But the whole problem was that the task assigned to the front was not new. The German command was expecting a possible Russian attack in the Gorodok area and was properly preparing to repel it. With a personal Stalinist order, jokes are bad, and Tsotomu Bagramyan had to mercilessly drive the troops under the destructive, destroying fire of the enemy, who occupied well-fortified positions. S.M. briefly mentioned in his memoirs what price had to be paid for the capture of Gorodok. Shtemenko: "An order is an order, but it was not possible to immediately take this settlement, which is very important for further advancement to Vitebsk and Polotsk. It was liberated from the invaders only a month later as a result of stubborn and bloody battles .

As in the case of the successful assault on Nevel, the Soviet command made vigorous attempts to carry out a deep breakthrough. But long, exhausting battles could not but affect the combat capability of the troops of the 1st Baltic Front. Moreover, the enemy showed determination to fight hard for every meter of land. It was not possible to develop a further offensive either in the direction of Vitebsk or in the direction of Polotsk. An attempt to break through from the Nevel area to Lovets also ended in vain. Since the second half of December, relative calm has been established in the sectors of the 1st and 2nd Baltic fronts.

In early January 1944, the General Staff sent a new version of the operational plan for the liberation of the Baltic States for approval by the Headquarters. This time, the developers proceeded from the unconditionally correct assumption that the main attention of the German command is riveted to Idritsa, Nevel and Gorodok, and it is from there that it expects our new offensive actions. Therefore, it was decided to strike the main blow with the forces of the Leningrad and Volkhov fronts. A deep breakthrough was to be made through Gatchina and Narva. The outstanding success

of the winter offensive of the Red Army in 1944 was the breakthrough of the blockade of Leningrad. Finally, an end was put to the heavy, bloody struggle that had lasted for three years. In honor of this long-awaited event, Moscow saluted the soldiers of the Leningrad and Volkhov fronts. Calculations of the General Staff

justified: the enemy's defense was broken, our troops rushed into the gap, clearing the territory of the Leningrad region from the invaders. Gatchina and Luga were liberated on schedule. Parts of the German 18th Army retreated in disorder. They were pursued by mobile tank-mechanized groups of Soviet troops. Only in the Volosovo area did the Germans manage to create a temporary line of defense, which was held by the 61st Infantry Division of Colonel Wengler. There were stubborn, fierce battles for several days. The German defense was broken through again, and our troops rushed to Narva. Hitler's anger fell on the commander of Army Group North, General Lindemann. The old, honored officer, who at

one time successfully commanded the 18th Army from the very beginning of the Eastern campaign, was retired. The new commander was a man who enjoyed the unlimited confidence of the Fuhrer. It was Colonel General Walter Model. It should be said

Few words.

The model went through a good command school in Guderian's tank group. Heinz Guderian managed to educate a number of generals who later became well-known military leaders. In his 24th motorized corps, Walter Model went from chief of staff of the regiment to commander of the 3rd Panzer Division. He advanced during the Eastern Campaign. Suffice it to recall that it was the 3rd Panzer Division that took Lkhvitsa in September 1941, thereby closing the ring around the Kyiv group of Soviet troops. During the three years of the war on the Eastern Front, Model became widely known for his courage, iron will and indestructible composure. All these qualities were combined in him with undoubted military leadership abilities. At the final stage of the war, Model became an indispensable person for Hitler. Where the front crackled the loudest, the Fuhrer sent Model. And he has never been disappointed.

Back in December 1943, the former commander of Army Group North issued an order to build the so-called Panther Line in the operational rear of his troops. As conceived by General Lindemann, a naturally strong defensive line was supposed to prevent the breakthrough of Soviet troops into the Baltic states. The plan provided for the following configuration of the Panther line: from the river

Narva, along Lake Peipus and Pskov and further south, including the old Soviet fortified areas - Pskov, Ostrov and Sebezh, which in a fairly short time could be turned into a serious obstacle to the advancing enemy. But the continuous battles at the front did not allow Lindemann to pay sufficient attention to rear affairs, so construction work on the Panther line was carried out through a stump-deck. When in February 1944 the troops of the Leningrad Front were approaching Narva, the new German commander had to deal with the organization of the defense virtually out of the blue. As soon as he arrived at the headquarters of the army group, Model took up his subordinates in a very cool

way. Oto Carius, a participant in the fighting on the Panther line, described his meeting with the commander as follows: "I was looking around to find a suitable position to concentrate my tanks when a car with a corps flag drove up from the front line. It stopped immediately, and I couldn't believe my eyes when Field Marshal Model jumped out of it. I reported what was required of me, and then a storm broke over me, the like of which you rarely see! Model's eyebrows were twitching... I wasn't even allowed to explain or say anything in response. I went to my tanks and instantly found myself on the other side of the Narva. The field marshal gave me an order that I will never forget:

- I place on you personal responsibility for ensuring that not a single Russian tank breaks through. None of your "tigers" should be disabled by enemy fire. Every trunk is dear to us here!"[186] . We add that on the day Model was appointed

commander, Hitler signed an order conferring on him the rank of Field Marshal. The field marshal's baton has become a powerful psychological dope. The model assured the Fuhrer that he would fight to the last

person.

Having understood the situation, the new commander calmed down somewhat. The Russians achieved decisive success only in the direction of Narva. The actions of the 2nd Baltic Front, which were an integral part of the Leningrad offensive operation, were unsuccessful. The troops of General M.M. Popov delivered another blow to Idritsa, to which the enemy was good

prepared. It was possible to take only Novosokolniki. Further, our troops got stuck in a deeply echeloned German defense, got involved in protracted battles, and by the end of February 10, they stopped 40–45 kilometers east of Idritsa.

The offensive of the 1st Baltic Front did not bring the desired results either. The maximum that was achieved in this area was to reach the near approaches to Polotsk and Vitebsk. Thus, in early February, the troops of four Soviet fronts approached the forefield of the Panther line and stopped to replenish and regroup before the now inevitable bloody assault. Walter Model sought to make full use of the operational pause that had

arisen. First of all, he demanded significant reinforcements from the Fuhrer's Headquarters. The troops, Model reported, had suffered heavy losses and were extremely exhausted from the long battles. He did not consider it necessary to hide from the Fuhrer the true state of affairs at the front. Hitler immediately complied with the requirements of the commander, whom he personally appointed. The newly formed 3rd SS Panzer Corps arrived in the Narva region. It consisted of the 11th SS Panzer Division "Nordland" and the SS assault brigade "Langmark", manned by the Flemings. After rest and replenishment, the SS assault brigade "Wallonia" was sent to the "Panther" line, which had already passed the baptism of fire and distinguished itself during the breakthrough of German troops from the Cherkasy pocket. Its commander, Leon Degrel, received the Knight's Cross for this battle from the hands of the Fuhrer himself. Presenting him with the highest award of the Reich, Hitler said: "If I had a son, I would like him to be like you." In addition, the command of Army Group North had high hopes for the 15th Grenadier, 19th and 20th SS motorized infantry divisions. These units were formed from Latvians and Estonians. At the headquarters of the Model, they expected that they would fight especially desperately, since they had nowhere to retreat, and in case of capture, they were expected to be shot on the spot. The Baltic SS troops were recruited from Aisargs and members of other pro-fascist organizations. The Soviet counterintelligence and the Special Departments of the Red Army equated such elements with the Vlasovites, therefore they could not count on any indulgence.

The Germans failed to hide the transfer of their reserves from the enemy. First of all, in the Narva direction, where the situation for them was threatening. Commander of the Leningrad Front, General L.A. Govorov, having received an intelligence report about the appearance of fresh SS units near Narva, decided not to give the Germans the opportunity to create a solid defense. On February 3, a specially trained assault detachment captured the German bridgehead on the left bank of the Narva River with a sudden blow.

However, Govorov had a worthy opponent. The commander of the 3rd SS Panzer Corps Friedrich von Scholz was considered one of the best combat generals in the Waffen SS. He was well versed in the environment. Therefore, after two hours, the tank reconnaissance battalion "Hermann von Selze" from the "Nordland" division launched a counterattack and recaptured the bridgehead captured by the Russians. In fact, this relatively small combat episode was the beginning of a long and bloody battle on the Panther line, which lasted more than two months. The next day, Govorov's troops

resumed attacks on the bridgehead. In addition, attempts were made to seize a bridgehead on the right bank. The Germans were forced to pull significant forces to Narva and consolidate their defenses. The narrow section from the coast of the Narva Bay to the northern outskirts of the city was covered by the 48th SS motorized infantry regiment General Seifardt and the 49th De Ruyter of the Nederland assault brigade. On the southern approaches to Narva, the Nordland division occupied positions with a number of additionally attached units: the 23rd SS Norge motorized infantry regiment, the 11th self-propelled artillery regiment, the 54th independent artillery battalion, and so on. Due to the high density of the German defense, our troops failed to capture a bridgehead in the Narva area. But to the south, near Crivasso, a narrow section of the right bank was recaptured. Constantly transferring reinforcements, Govorov was able to hold this bridgehead. But the Soviet units could not move forward from it. Therefore, on February 12, the headquarters of the Leningrad Front decided to suspend further actions. The Germans also went on the defensive. Both sides were intensively preparing for subsequent operations.

Meanwhile, the General Staff was making adjustments to the plan for the defeat of German troops in the Baltic. operational management

received comprehensive information about what the Panther line is. CM. Shtemenko recalled: "As a result of the hostilities, our troops found themselves in front of a deep, well-developed enemy defense in engineering terms. On the way lay, in particular, the Pskov-Ostrov fortified area, which was supported from the south by the main forces of the 16th German army. Therefore, the work of operational officers was personally headed by the Chief of the General Staff, General of the Army A.I. Antonov. At the

heart of the plan to storm the Panther line was the idea of forcing the Germans to disperse their forces in several directions, misleading them as to where the main blow would be delivered. To this end, a number of measures were planned to mask the intentions of the Soviet command. Decisive importance was attached to the strike of the Leningrad Front on the Narva Isthmus in the direction of Pärnu and bypassing Tartu from the north. An auxiliary blow was delivered by the troops of the same front to Pskov, in order to then develop success in the lower reaches of the Western Dvina. Another part of the forces of the Leningrad Front was to be allocated for an offensive bypassing Lake Peipus, with

the goal of reaching Tartu from the south. In the light of such a large-scale task, L.A. Govorov submitted to the Headquarters a proposal to disband the Volkhov Front. He believed that as a result, his front would receive additional troops, absolutely necessary for operations on such a wide sector. In addition, Pskov was located in the Volkhov Front. Therefore, in the course of an offensive, it would be inexpedient to link interaction and engage in the organization of a unified command and control of the two fronts in the Pskov direction. All this will become an extra burden for the commander. Headquarters agreed with Govorov's proposal, and on February 15, 1944, the Volkhov Front was disbanded. However, after a month and a half it had to be recreated again, but not even as Volkhovsky, but as the 3rd Baltic.

Before the 2nd Baltic Front, General M.M. Popov was given an almost old task. His main blow was again aimed at Idritsa and further on Rezekne. The only difference was that two more auxiliary strikes were being prepared - on Ostrov and Opochka.

The main blow of the 1st Baltic Front under the command of General I.Kh. Bagramyan was planned in the direction of Vitebsk.

At the same time, with its right wing, it was supposed to interact with the 2nd Baltic. The General Staff counted on the forces of the adjacent flanks of these two fronts to break through the enemy defenses in the Idritsa area, which the 2nd Baltic Front alone was clearly beyond the power of. That damned Idritsa hasn't let the General Staff breathe calmly since October 1943. Not to mention how much blood was shed there. The capture of Idritsa was not only a matter of operational sense, but also a matter of military honor! As a result, the actions of the

Soviet troops were supposed to lead to the crushing of the enemy forces, the breakthrough of the Panther line and the exit of the main strike groups to the Gulf of Riga. Thus, Army Group North found itself isolated in the Baltic states, which created the conditions for its complete destruction and opened the Red Army a direct road to the "lair of the beast" - to East Prussia.

To coordinate the actions of the fronts in the Baltic States, the Headquarters of the Supreme Command sent Marshal S.K. Timoshenko. In his memoirs, S.M. Shtemenko described his impressions of cooperation as follows: "I was assigned to him as chief of staff. I took it, frankly, without enthusiasm. However, an order is an order... After a while, I was invited to the marshal's for dinner. This dinner turned out to be very unpleasant explanations.

Why were you sent with me? the marshal immediately asked and, without waiting for my answer, he continued: "Do you want to teach us old people how to keep an eye on us?" In vain! .. You were still walking under the table, and we were already leading divisions into battle, conquering Soviet power for you. They graduated from the academies and you think that

you hold God by the beard With such an "encouraging" parting word, I began to fulfill my new duties "[188] . Comrade Timoshenko strongly disliked all sorts of "wise men" there! In this he was in full solidarity with another, even greater commander, whose name is still on everyone's lips. Such an outstanding military thinker was instructed by Stalin to defeat Field Marshal Maud
ate eat.

On March 1, 1944, at 11:20 a.m., Soviet artillery preparation thundered along the entire length of the Panther line. The troops of the Leningrad, 1st and 2nd Baltic fronts crossed

on the offensive. From the front command post of General Popov on the outskirts of the village of Spichino, S.M. watched the attack of German positions. Shtemenko: "The results of the first day of fighting in the zone of the 2nd Baltic Front were clearly unsatisfactory. All that day we were on the front-line NP and saw with our own eyes how fiercely the Germans defended themselves, how dense their artillery and machine-gun fire turned out to be. He literally did not give a move to our infantry"[189] . The ground forces were not helped by strong air support either. Aviation operations were affected both by insufficiently favorable weather conditions and the lack of proper data on targets in the enemy defenses. The attack resumed the next day. The

Germans met our troops with a powerful barrage. All attacks were repulsed. The troops suffered very significant losses. Once again, the 2nd Baltic Front could not advance a single step towards Idritsa! But the picture was no better on other fronts. It turned out that the Germans guessed the plan of the Soviet command. The fire covered the troops precisely in the directions of the main attacks.

On March 3, a conference of front commanders was convened in Spichino. Offensive actions decided to temporarily stop and go on the defensive. All those present agreed that the enemy was extremely strongly fortified in the Idritsa direction and it was possible to break through his defense only if the concentration of manpower and equipment was even greater than it was planned at the beginning. Consequently, heavy losses and a huge expenditure of ammunition are inevitable. A telegram was sent to Headquarters with a request to reinforce the 2nd Baltic Front with the 3rd Cavalry Corps. It was decided to abandon the idea of a frontal strike in a narrow area in front of the Idritskaya group of Germans. Instead of advancing on adjacent flanks, both fronts now struck in different directions: the 2nd Baltic front, with the forces of two armies north of the Pustoshka-Idritsa railway, the 1st Baltic front, west of Nevel, also with two armies. To carry out such an operation, it was necessary to expose the junction with the Leningrad Front.

However, the Headquarters did not agree with the proposals developed at the meeting of the senior command staff. An instruction came from Moscow in which the fronts were given essentially the same

tasks. Again it was necessary to storm Idritsa with adjacent fronts. The only new thing was that the 1st Baltic Front delivered the main blow not in the Vitebsk, but in the Idritsa direction with the aim of capturing the city of Sebezh. The commanders of the armies and fronts spoke out against the continuation of the Idritsa nightmare. But Comrade Stalin's instructions had no two interpretations. Therefore, Marshal Timoshenko said that orders are not discussed - they are carried out. On March 10, the next, fifth general assault on Idritsa began. Artillery cannonade, unabated, thundered for a whole week. Wave after wave of troops of the 1st and 2nd Baltic fronts attacked. The result was, as S.M.

Shtemenko, "two dents" in the German defense. One at 25, the other at 20 kilometers along the front and 7-9 kilometers in depth. The Germans in these areas undertook a tactical withdrawal to previously prepared positions. By the end of the seventh day of the assault, our troops were exhausted, bled to death and stopped. Even Marshal Timoshenko, who at one time did something similar on the Mannerheim Line, admitted that further attacks were futile and ordered to stop the offensive. Only the Leningrad Front was spared from this meat grinder: nothing was said about it in the instructions of the Headquarters, so L.A. Govorov took advantage of the respite to regroup his troops and conduct a more thorough reconnaissance of the enemy's defenses. Combat operations on the Narva Isthmus were carried out on both sides by small tank and infantry subunits. On the morning of March 18, Marshal Timoshenko convened for the second time a meeting of front commanders, members of the Military Councils and chiefs of staff.

All the assembled generals believed that there was no point in continuing the offensive. But how to report this to Moscow? According to the memoirs of S.M. Shtemenko, for more than two hours he, together with the chief of staff of the 1st Baltic Front V.V. Kurasov and 2nd Baltic L.M.

Sandalov worked on compiling a report to Stalin. The first part of this document briefly described the course of the failed operation and detailed the reasons for the failure. Further, a 30-day period was requested from the Supreme Commander-in-Chief to prepare a new offensive

operations in the Idritsa direction, as well as requests to replenish the troops with people and equipment, front-line arsenals - with a large amount of ammunition. The second part of the report smoothed over the unfavorable impression. Stalin's attention was drawn to the fact that, according to intelligence, the enemy had transferred the 24th Infantry, 28th Light and 12th Tank Divisions from the Narva Isthmus to reinforce his Idritsa grouping. In this way, the Supreme was hinted at the possibility of making a more optimal decision. The Germans seriously weakened the direction to Narva, thereby creating favorable conditions for the offensive of the troops of the Leningrad Front. As a result, Stalin allowed the new assault on Idritsa to be postponed until April. I must say, General

L.A. By that time, Govorov had managed to achieve some tactical successes. Realizing that the enemy's defenses were thoroughly prepared, he decided to abandon the method of frontal assaults. Govorov exhausted the Germans with constant harassing actions, testing the strength of their positions in many areas. This tactic has paid off. The troops of the Leningrad Front captured a bridgehead south of Narva, very convenient for the development of a large-scale offensive. A very tempting operational plan was developed. Govorov proposed to strike from the bridgehead to the rear of the German troops concentrated on the left bank of the Narva River. At the same time, the SS divisions "Nordland", "Feldhernholle" and the 61st Infantry Division of the Wehrmacht fell into the bag. The headquarters authorized an offensive operation south of Narva. March 18 at 7 o'clock in the morning on the position of the German

61st Infantry Division, a shaft of fire hit. After a powerful artillery preparation, our troops went on the offensive from the bridgehead and immediately broke through the enemy defenses. The German command was well aware of the danger. Reserve units were immediately advanced to the breakthrough site, in the area of the village of Lembitu, supported by a battalion of heavy tanks and attack aircraft. The Germans successfully counterattacked and by the end of the day they had practically restored the situation.

On March 19, Soviet troops repeated the attack. The infantrymen of Colonel Wengler were again driven down from their positions. Then came the German counterattack. So the general's hopes

Govorov to make a deep breakthrough did not come true. Until March 22, a fierce, bloody struggle was going on around the bridgehead. The troops of the Leningrad Front could not develop the offensive. But the attempts of the Germans to throw them off the right bank of the Narva ended in failure. Valuable foothold was retained. Later he delivered

The Germans are in a lot of trouble.

The April offensive of the 1st and 2nd Baltic fronts again proved to be of little effect. As in March, Soviet troops slightly wedged into the enemy's defenses. Neither the task of a deep breakthrough, nor the task of defeating Army Group North could be solved. The fronts advanced only 18–20 kilometers.

The offensive of the Leningrad Front against Pskov developed just as unsuccessfully. Moreover, the Germans took advantage of the fact that the main forces of Govorov's troops were transferred from Narva to the south. An elite tank regiment "Grossdeutschland" arrived on the Narva Isthmus with a special mission, commanded by Colonel Hyacinth Count von Strachwitz, who was repeatedly mentioned in the reports of the Wehrmacht High Command. Field Marshal Model personally set him the task of liquidating the ill-fated Russian bridgehead. During the March battles, the Germans managed to keep in their hands the key item 33.7, which they called the "boot". This "boot"

deeply cut into the territory of the bridgehead, dividing it in two - into "eastern" and "western" bags [so in German operational documents. — Auth.]. That is, the Germans had the opportunity to defeat the Soviet troops in parts. On April 6, 1944, the Grossdeutschland Regiment, with attached tank and infantry units, carried out a successful operation to destroy the "Eastern Sack". On April 19, Colonel Strachwitz tried to complete the liquidation of the Russian bridgehead. But the intentions of the Germans were obvious, so our troops were expecting their offensive and were well prepared to repel it. The fierce battle continued throughout the day until dusk. The Germans were driven back with heavy losses. The soldiers of General Govorov again held the bridgehead. In the future, the Germans did not take any active actions in this area.

With the onset of spring thaw, a lull settled on the fronts. Thus, Field Marshal Model managed to stop the Soviet troops on the Panther line and temporarily stabilize the front of Army Group North. The operational pause lasted here until July 1944.

Three months later, Soviet troops launched a new offensive, finally broke through the Panther line and entered the Baltic.

Backstab

Let us ask the question: why did our troops fail to defeat Army Group North during the offensive in the autumn of 1943 and in the winter of 1944? Here is the opinion of S.M. Shtemenko: "In a general form, it has already been answered: because we did not have enough forces in these areas at that time. The reasons for the shortage are also known to the reader: after all, it was at that time that we were concentrating our main efforts on the Right-Bank Ukraine in order to decisively defeat the very strong and active Army Group South. In addition, it was decided to continue the offensive of the Kalinin, Western and Central fronts . In this case, the situation is somewhat —

reminiscent of the spring campaign of 1942. Then the Headquarters decided in the same way to attack everywhere and at once. It was a mistake. This led to the dissipation of forces, the depletion of reserves and did not give any practical results. And in the fall of 1943, the Soviet command repeated this mistake. Such is the point of view of one of our most authoritative

military leaders.

There were other reasons as well. First of all, the pace of the offensive of the Red Army was seriously influenced by the natural conditions in the theater of operations. Leningrad, Novgorod, Pskov regions are vast forests, non-freezing swamps, many lakes and rivers. The nature of the terrain severely limits the actions of tanks and mechanized formations, placing the main burden in battles on the shoulders of the infantry. The troops are tied to a few, very bad roads. Frequent fogs and rains hinder the work of artillery and

aviation spotters, which reduces the effectiveness of artillery and air support for advancing troops.

Finally, S.M. Shtemenko emphasizes another important circumstance. The supply capabilities of the Soviet troops were much worse than those of the enemy. This was due to the fact that the Army Group "North" had in its operational rear, on the territory of the Baltic states and East Prussia, a developed network of railways and roads. Therefore, the Germans carried out the supply of their troops uninterruptedly, while the Leningrad, 1st and 2nd Baltic fronts felt a constant lack of ammunition and other types of supplies. It seems that everything

is clear with the reasons for our failures. However, an attentive historian has the right to ask clarifying questions. For example, regarding the lack of forces among the troops of Baghramyan, Popov and Govorov. CM. Shtemenko claims that "From the very beginning, the total strength of Army Group North exceeded 700,000 men, and we were able to counter it with just over a million men." Meanwhile, in the fall of 1943, Colonel General Lindemann had only two armies - the 16th and 18th, which did not include a single tank division. These two armies held a front of more than 500 kilometers, which speaks for itself. Ten SS divisions arrived to replenish the northern group only at the beginning of February 1944. In addition, the rapid offensive of the Red Army on the southern and central wing of the Soviet-German front forced Hitler to take all the reserves from Lindemann. The German commander could rely solely on his available forces, scattered over a widely stretched front. Therefore, in fairness, it should be said that the Soviet troops had a sufficient preponderance of forces over the North Army Group. The main mistake of the Germans in the Eastern campaign was the underestimation of our reserves. This is common knowledge. If we talk about the extremely unfavorable nature of the terrain, then this circumstance could be both

a minus and a plus. For example, in Belarus, the terrain was no less swampy, wooded, and very rugged. The brilliant Soviet commander K.K. built his calculations on this. Rokossovsky, when he was preparing troops for Operation Bagration. He decided to strike the main blows on

tank impassable, practically unsuitable for the actions of mobile cavalry-mechanized formations of the terrain. As a result, one of the most significant victories of the Great Patriotic War was achieved.

As for supply problems associated with the lack of the necessary road network, this picture was not everywhere. During the two years of their stay in Novgorod and Pskov, the Germans took some measures to improve the old roads and even laid new ones. German officer Otto Carius recalled: "The futility of many measures taken in close proximity to the front caused us dissatisfaction. For example, someone came up with the idea of fortifying roads in the swampy area of Tosno. It was supposed to make wooden decks and cover them with asphalt. The roads had already been laid to Gatchina itself, and then approached the front. The Russians, of course, took advantage of these good roads with pleasure for the offensive in January 1944. In addition, in the above-mentioned report to Stalin, S.M. Shtemenko, V.V. Kurasov and L.M. Sandalov made a request for the supply of tens of thousands of tons of ammunition to the 1st and 2nd Baltic Fronts to support the April offensive on Idritsa. This means that the possibility of proper supply of troops was still available.

It seems that the main reason for the unsuccessful assault on the Panther line was different. The author considers it necessary to quote again the report to the Supreme Commander of March 18, 1944: "... In the difficult conditions of the Baltic states, more thorough preparation for the offensive and somewhat better organization of the battle"[192]. Of course, these are the basics of military art. But neglecting them leads to inevitable defeat. Unfortunately, such negligence repeatedly took place on the part of the Soviet command during the fighting on the Panther line.

Let's take the assault on Gorodok as an example. An order was issued from above to the commander: take it at any cost. For a whole month, the troops of the 1st Baltic Front pierced the German defenses. In the end, Gorodok was taken. The headquarters of General Lindemann made a simple conclusion: if the Russians stormed this settlement so stubbornly, then they would inflict the next blow on Vitebsk and Polotsk. Therefore, these directions should be strengthened as much as possible. As a result

offensive actions undertaken by the 1st Baltic Front, first in February, then in March and April 1944, ended in failure. Precisely because Bagramyan's troops were advancing on Vitebsk and Polotsk, where the Germans were impatiently waiting for them.

Next - Idritsa! The most obvious example of how not to prepare an offensive. By the way, back in November of the forty-third M.M. It became extremely clear to Popov that the continuation of the assault on Idritsa was completely hopeless. And in January 1944, when the General Staff was developing a new offensive plan, the Military Council of the 2nd Baltic Front officially spoke out against concentrating efforts in the Idritsa direction. Generals Popov, Bulganin and Sandalov argued that the operation here had no prospects in view of the dense defense of the enemy, the mobility of his reserves, and the unfavorable nature of the terrain. But the main thing was that the Germans were well aware of the preparations for our attack here. And, we can say, they were quite happy with it. The Headquarters representative, Marshal Timoshenko, knew the opinion of the Military Council. But he did not think to object to the instructions given by Stalin. As a result, two more failed assaults and completely unjustified losses. The unsatisfactory

organization of the battle is another serious reason for the failures that befell our army. First of all, it concerned the work of intelligence. CM. Shtemenko recalled: "The enemy organized the fire system taking into account our strikes and managed to hide a lot from the eyes of Soviet intelligence. In the course of the artillery preparation, we failed to reliably suppress the enemy defenses" [193] . A simple question: what happens if the enemy fire points are not detected and destroyed by artillery and aircraft? Answer: our advancing infantry will immediately choke on blood. This is called "stepping blindfolded". What is the point of setting the same 1st Baltic Front the task of capturing Vitebsk, if even the battalion commanders do not know what kind of enemy resistance they will face? Not to mention the fact that our troops attacked Vitebsk and Idritsa not for the first time, and therefore the German defenses had to be thoroughly studied. And still, on the day of the offensive, the Germans presented them with surprises.